

ESSAYS

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by

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[August 27, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/some-heretical-comments-on-the-holy-spirit/>]

[Also: <http://www.religioustolerance.org/thom04.htm>]

Some “Heretical” Comments on the Holy Spirit

Alton C. Thompson

When, in the Bible, reference is made to the Holy Spirit (or “Spirit of God,” etc.), the clear implication is that reference is being made to a supernatural Being: An invisible, intangible Being, true, but a “real” Being nonetheless. What I would like to suggest in this essay is that (a) there is a *naturalistic* explanation of the Holy Spirit which, though, is (b) *purely* naturalistic at only one level, with the explanation at a “higher” level being less clear, and thereby allowing room for an at least *partial* supernatural explanation.

The basis for my argument lies in the answer to the question: How do we even know that there *is* such a “thing” as the Holy Spirit? And the Biblical answer is that no one admits ever to have *seen* the Holy Spirit, only to have *felt* the Holy Spirit’s presence. That is, the existence of the Holy Spirit has been *inferred* from certain feelings—feelings judged, subjectively, to be of a highly positive nature. And those feelings have been said to have “produced” various positive behaviors.

In Romans 14:17 Paul says that the Holy Spirit gives one feelings of righteousness, peace and joy. In II Corinthians 3:17 he says that the Spirit of the Lord gives (a feeling of) freedom. And, most famously, in Galatians 5:22 – 23 he says that the Spirit produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control. Note that this list of nine virtues includes both feelings and (implied) actions (or, in the case of self-control, *non*-actions).

It is easy to simply take Paul at his word here, but we moderns cannot be expected to do so—nor *should* we. As individuals living in an Age of Science, we should note that Paul has identified a series of feelings that he has had that he has recognized as desirable, perhaps even pleasurable. And as one arose (outside of Palestine) in some version of Judaism—with its emphasis on the Law—Paul was very much “convicted” with the idea that certain actions are “good,” other actions “bad.” Thus, when Paul recognized that when he had certain feelings, and those feelings made it easy for him to engage in “good” behaviors, he took notice: This is something which would make him feel excited and, indeed, feel that God was behind this. But in thinking of God’s being involved, and the fact that he had not actually seen God, he attributed the feeling to God’s Spirit—i.e., the Holy Spirit.

This is, of course, but a guess as to what went on in Paul’s mind, but for us moderns it is a very plausible guess. However, given that we are living in 2011 rather than the early part of the first century, the plausible explanation—for us—of what was happening to Paul is that certain *internal*

processes were occurring in Paul, and that it was those internal processes that were *directly* responsible for Paul's reactions.

Once we have come to understand ("perceive" might be a more apt term) Paul's reactions in this light, we can ask: What caused these internal processes to occur? In asking this question, we are now asking a *second-stage* question, our "internal processes" answer being the answer to our *first-stage* question. In answering this second-stage question, I would suggest several possible answers:

- A supernatural Being—i.e., God—may have chosen to cause those processes to occur within Paul, and they did (this involving no "input" from Paul).
- Paul may have (in effect, if not actually) requested those processes to occur within him. For example, prayers by Paul may have been heard by God, Who then blessed Paul by causing those processes to occur in Paul.
- Paul may have engaged in certain activities which happened to be *causally connected* to these internal processes, so that he inadvertently was *himself* responsible for the occurrence of those internal processes.

The modern (such as me) might be especially attracted to this third explanation; one who is might then ask:

- What, specifically, did Paul do to set in motion the chain of events that led him to the feelings/actions which he attributed to the Holy Spirit?
- Are there certain activities that *we moderns* can engage in that will produce those "Pauline" feelings/actions in *us*?

Frankly, I am not interested in the first question—but some may be, and I encourage them to pursue that interest. My interest, rather, is in the second question; but before addressing that question I would like to point out that I am *not* asserting that our second-stage question here has a purely naturalistic answer. Rather, what I am saying is that:

- I think that it would be foolish to simply rule out the possibility of supernatural intervention. I, for one, am puzzled by the mysteries of time, space, matter, and life, and fail to comprehend how anyone can say, with absolute confidence, that something (such as God) does *not* exist. I simply can't "wrap my mind around" such a non-belief.
- If it would be foolish to rule out the possibility of supernatural intervention, it is also foolish to rule out the possibility that the Pauline feelings/actions can have as *another* cause *our own* planned actions.

If one believes—as I do—that *both* causes can be involved, the implication is that various actions on our part can result in the Pauline feelings/actions, and that we should therefore experiment with various actions to find out what “works,” and what doesn’t. Note that if one only accepts the first explanation, one may very well be penalizing oneself—and others—which failure could be interpreted as sinful! Thus, I suggest that we accept the second position--either along with the first (those of us who are theists), or alone (those who are agnostics or atheists)—given the potential benefits associated with such acceptance—and I hope that the reader finds this suggestion liberating.

My own entry in this regard is the Structured Interaction Group (SIG), participation in which—I *hypothesize*—can result in “Spirit-filling” on the part of participants, with associated Pauline-type feelings/actions. See Chapter 8 in my [*What Are Churches For?*](#) I can provide no *evidence* in favor of the SIG, but am hoping that others will experiment with it, to determine if my hypothesis has merit.

[August 28, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/towards-perceptual-change/>]

Toward Perceptual Change

Alton C. Thompson

In my recently-posted [What Are Churches For?](#), I stated (p. 41) that “one likely could argue that virtually all—if not all—of humankind’s problems over the millennia have their ultimate origin in the Discrepancy.” No one yet *has* so argued (to any significant degree), but I believe that the *potential* exists for a solid argument to that effect. I myself have no interest in developing such an argument (for my interest is more in the future than the past), but I wish that *someone* would.

What is this “Discrepancy” to which I am referring? In brief, it refers to the fact that prior to the Agricultural Revolution (which occurred roughly 10,000 years ago) there occurred a co-development of humans as biological entities and their then-current gatherer-hunter way of life. That is, on the one hand, that way of life helped determine how humans developed from a biological standpoint (in both physical and behavioral characteristics); but on the other hand, biological developments occurred independent of that way of life, which developments resulted in changes in way of life. In fact, those latter developments eventuated in the Agricultural Revolution—and the beginnings of civilization.

Prior to the Agricultural Revolution, humans—as biological entities—had, one might say, become “designed” for a gatherer-hunter way of life. With the Agricultural Revolution, however, although changes began occurring in way of life—with changes becoming especially rapid after the Industrial Revolution (c 1750 CE)—comparable changes were not occurring in human biology. In fact, although significant changes have occurred in ways of life over the past 10,000 years, little change has occurred in human biology—a fact that has caused sociobiologist David P. Barash to refer to the first as the “hare” and the latter as the “tortoise.”

Put in other words, since the Agricultural Revolution, there has grown an increasing “Discrepancy” between the way of life for which we had become “designed,” on the one hand, and the way of life that we actually lead, on the other hand. Are *forced* to lead, one might say, given that—realistically—most of us do not have the option of adopting some other way of life. Were one to become, e.g., an Amish, one would have a very different way of life; but for most of us, that is simply not a realistic option, for we have, e.g., religious ideas that deviate substantially from those associated with the Amish, and are not interested in converting.

Since posting my *What Are Churches For?* I have come to realize that my reference to the Discrepancy as an important causal factor was rather glib. I can excuse this glibness by noting that my orientation is more to the future than to the past, but I have felt some guilt regarding my glibness, and therefore want to use this essay to “atone” for this “sin.” In particular do I want to develop some relevant points presented in Rupert Ross’s exceedingly important (in my opinion)

*Returning to the Teachings: Exploring Aboriginal Justice*¹—a book that I read about 6 months ago.

Ross may have *intended* his book to be merely of a reportorial nature, but I *interpret* it as a book that is concerned with thought processes of people who are living in accord with their “design specifications.” Given that I argue in *What Are Churches For?* that we humans *today* must develop for ourselves a *new* way of life that moves us in the direction of our “design specifications,” and present (in Chapter 8) a “vehicle” for moving in that direction, it should be no mystery why I have such a high opinion of Ross’s book—and use this essay to indicate just *why* I am so “high” on Ross’s book.

Unfortunately, I am unable to find the notes that I had taken on Ross’s book, and therefore will need to rely on my memory—which, given that I am 71, “isn’t so good no more”! Thus, if I make any misstatements here relative to the book, please understand that they are not intentional.

As I recall Ross’s book, he noted that the phrase “all our relations” is one commonly used by Aboriginals. I was aware of this fact from having attended several Indian Summer Festivals held at the Milwaukee lakefront in early September for a number of years now. But that attendance had not taught me much about the *meaning* that Aboriginals attach to that phrase. Ross, however, educated me on this matter by informing me that when Aboriginals use that phrase, they are not being grammatically incorrect—using “relations” when they should be using “relatives;” rather, they are referring not just to relatives in the common sense (one’s human relatives), but to all components of observable Reality. Indeed, those who use this phrase are thinking not so much of the *components* of that Reality, as they are of the *relationships* that exist among those components. Put another way, they are thinking not so much in *noun* terms, as *verb* ones.

We “civilized” folk differ from Aboriginals in that *we* tend to think in noun, rather than verb terms. On the face of it, this is a trivial difference. In actuality, however, it is a profoundly important difference—a point that I will try to develop here.

Let me begin by offering an explanation of why verb-oriented thinking was developed by Aboriginal peoples. Historically, they have had some variety of gatherer-hunter way of life, the particulars of their way of life being dependent on where they lived on the globe; thus, those living in arctic areas have had a rather different way of life than those living in the tropics. In both cases, however, they were living not only (a) in Nature, but (b) in the here-and-now. They did this *not* out of a matter of choice, of course, but out of *necessity*: Their very survival depended on a mode of thinking so oriented, and groups *not* having such a mode of thinking simply disappeared and produced no descendants.

Given that their minds were oriented to the surround and an ever-changing present (from a seasonal standpoint), they identified and named the various elements of the surround that they perceived, true, but their way of life dictated that they focus more on the *relationships* that they perceived among those things than the things themselves.

¹ Toronto: Penguin Canada, 1996. This was re-issued (in paperback) by Penguin Global in 2009.

In addition, the fact that they identified *kinds* of things in the surround suggests that they were more interested in *qualitative* differences between things than in *quantitative* ones. Even with a *given* kind of thing identified (such as humans), however, the emphasis was on differentiating between members of the given category in *kind* rather than *degree* terms. Thus, a corollary to their orientation to relationships was a de-emphasis of *quantitative* thinking. Noun-oriented thinking, in contrast, has as a corollary the use of many *adjectives*, with many of those adjectives being of a *judgmental* nature. As such, they implicitly use quantitative, rather than qualitative, thought processes. Thus, although the concept of being, e.g., “stupid” is common with “civilized” peoples, that concept is close to being foreign to Aboriginal ones.

The relevance of the above discussion is that the mode of thought used by a people has a strong effect on their *behavior*—both with reference to other people, and to Earth. If one’s focus is on relationships, one’s interest is not so much on the things one perceives “out there” as on how those things *fit together*; and the fact that one’s focus is on movement-interaction, implies that one perceives the Larger Whole itself as being in flux—as varying with a seasonal rhythm, and perhaps also changing somewhat over time. However, given that one perceives (if but unconsciously) oneself as an active agent in this Larger Whole, and realizes (if but unconsciously) that one wants that Larger Whole to maintain stability over time, in acting in the surround, one makes an effort to disturb it as little as possible. This does not prevent one from killing animals to eat for the survival of one’s group; but in doing so, one may very well feel a sense of guilt, and therefore feel a need to do something to atone for one’s killing, and then engage in some sort of ritual.

In relating to the others in one’s group, one will tend to do so in a cooperative manner. This is done in part because the survival of one’s group necessitates such behavior, in part because the operation of female-choice sexual selection has “programmed” one to so behave. An additional reason for such behavior, however, is that one perceives the others in one’s group in *qualitative* terms, so that one’s mode of perception virtually prevents one from thinking of the others in one’s group as “inferior” to oneself, and thereby as “domination fodder.” Such benign thinking may not, however, be evident in one’s relationships with members of other human groups—and I have no explanation, at present, for that “anomaly.”

In addition to behaving relative to others in a cooperative manner, the fact that they perceive not only relations in Nature, but (seasonal) change normal, led them to perceive other people as subject to change over time. This gave others the freedom to change over time—for the simple reason that it was expected of them. That is, there was no pressure to conform within the society; so that because individuality was accepted as “normal,” it developed as a matter of course.

Aboriginals used both hemispheres of their brains, but the right hemisphere dominated. This had a number of implications, including the fact that *symbols* played a more important role in their thinking relative to *words* (which, for Aboriginals, were oral rather than written). In addition, *stories* played an important role in their thinking, with stories typically involving many symbols. As a member of a group, one learned not only from one’s own personal observations and from being told things, but from stories that one heard told by one’s elders.

In a noun-oriented society, where relational thinking is much less common, one learns to think of oneself as isolated from others. Indeed, in such societies one tends to think in reductionistic terms, with a (philosophically) materialistic twist. That is, one tends to think of others (and even oneself) as mere “things,” as mere clumps of matter. Nor does one think of oneself as part of the surround. In part, this latter fact is attributable to the fact that, as a “civilized” person, one’s environment is basically a built—i.e., an artificial—one. However, one might argue that the very existence of that built environment has its basis in the non-relational thinking that began to become commonplace millennia ago, and gave rise to a *control* mentality.

Now if one thinks of one’s *surround* in non-relational terms, one will find it easy to exploit, despoil it; and if one thinks of *other humans* in reductionistic-(philosophically) materialistic terms, one will find it easy to exploit them. Individuals differ, of course, from a genetic standpoint, so that some will have more of a propensity than others to (attempt to) exploit others. But those with such a propensity can be expected to begin to do so once their perceptions change, and this is precisely what has happened.

When the Hebrew law-givers and prophets came on the scene, the societal situation was one of some exploiting others. These people were individuals who had somehow been able to retain (or re-acquire) relational thinking, and began to preach the desirability of such thinking. However, given that they were preaching in a society within which relational thinking was no longer common, they had little success. As I point out in Chapter 1 of *What Are Churches For?*, the ancient Hebrew law-givers developed an amazing set of ethical laws, and developed an amazing set of tactics for ensuring that those laws were followed. The plain fact of the matter, however, is that their efforts were for naught—they failed. And *why* was that? Because if the goal is to restore relational thinking, and the sort of behavior that stems from that mode of thinking, one must recognize that one must work for a *way of life* that *supports* that mode of thinking.

In my *What Are Churches For?* I suggest that moving in the direction of a society of cooperative eco-communities (CECs) would not only move us toward a way of life more in accord with our “design specifications,” but would address the problem of “global warming.” I even suggest a strategy for achieving that goal. More importantly, however, I suggest (in Chapter 8) a “vehicle” for moving in that direction—the Structured Interaction Group (SIG)—and add that I regard the creation of SIGs as the most important thing we can do currently. What I would add now to that discussion is that I believe that participation in a SIG could help one become weaned away from one’s current mode of thought in the direction of relational thinking.

I note that solutions could very well emerge from SIGs *other* than what I propose in my eBook—and add that I am “fine” with that, so long as those solutions lead us in the right direction. And in Chapter 9 I argue that the churches would be ideal sites for the creation and operation of SIGs.

The churches have been too oriented to salvation in the *afterlife*, and insufficiently oriented to salvation in *this life*. That Jesus had an interest in the latter was demonstrated by his saving Peter from drowning (in Matthew), by his healings, etc. I, for one, believe that it is time for the churches to become “converted” (!) to more of an emphasis on the latter—for our survival as a species may depend on it.

[September 1, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/the-wisdom-of-an-economist/>]

The “Wisdom” of an Economist

Alton C. Thompson

Today, the Truth-out web site publicized some “words of wisdom” regarding happiness by Dr. Jeffrey D. Sachs, Professor of Economics and Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University. In his “[The Economics of Happiness](#)” Prof. Sachs offered the following five “initial conclusions” regarding happiness:

- Economic progress is important. “Economic development that alleviates poverty is a vital step in boosting happiness.”
- The “relentless pursuit of GNP [i.e., Gross National Product] to the exclusion of other goals is . . . no path to happiness.
- Happiness “is achieved through a balanced approach to life by both individuals and societies.”
- Global “capitalism presents many direct threats to happiness.”
- To “promote happiness, we must identify the many factors other than GNP that can raise or lower a society’s well-being.”

What prompted Sachs’s discussion of well-being is that he had co-hosted, with Prime Minister Jigme Singye (of the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan), in Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan, a conference attended by “experts” on the subject of human well-being. The conference itself had its basis in a declaration (in July 2011) by the United Nations General Assembly “calling on countries to examine how national policies can promote happiness in their societies.”

The reason that Thimphu had been chosen as the site for this meeting is that 40 years ago “Bhutan’s fourth king [Jigme Singye], young and newly installed, made a remarkable choice: Bhutan should pursue ‘gross national happiness’ rather than gross national product.” Were Bhutan a Christian nation, such a decision would have been beyond belief! However, in Bhutan the dominant religion is [Vajrayana Buddhism](#).

It is heartening to learn that the leaders of at least one country in the world seem to have a sincere interest in the well-being of their people. I have several reactions to Sachs’s essay, however:

- There is much more to human well-being than the five points mentioned by Sachs—as I seek to illustrate in Chapters 3 and 4 of my e-book, [*What Are Churches For?*](#)
- “Economic development” can have a variety of meanings; in Sachs’s usage it presumably must occur within the context of existing societal systems, and as I argue in my e-book, what’s needed today is societal system change—especially in Western countries such as the United States.
- There’s the question of how development should occur, and implicit in Sachs’s discussion is the assumption that it must be directed by government. My stance on this issue, rather, is that it should be undertaken by private individuals—either acting as individuals or as members of groups. Of course, given that our society is dominated by corporate elite, it’s unlikely that our leaders—governmental and otherwise—would be interested in “promoting the general welfare” anyway! If any “plan” for eliminating ill-being in our society ever gets implemented, this will occur via the decisions and actions of private citizens; it’s simply naïve to assume otherwise.
- Sachs’s stance is obviously a “planning *for*” one, mine is a “planning *by*” one. Thus, although in my Chapters 3 and 4 I provide a large number of ideas as to what humans need for well-being, I deliberately avoid offering “definitive” answers. My reason for doing this: I want people to decide *for themselves* what they need for well-being, not have decisions made *for* them. I offer ideas regarding what’s needed for well-being merely as “talking points.”
- I believe that people should have certain *personal traits* in addition to having well-being—and list several on pp. 110 and 111 in my e-book. For me, the “Good Society” is not simply one in which everyone is always happy (an impossibility, of course!), but is one in which people try to be “good.”

Perhaps the leaders in Bhutan, given the dominance of Buddhism in that country, would agree with this last point. Sachs’s essay, however, gives us no information on that matter. But why should that be surprising? Sachs is an academic, and therefore lives within a very small world.

[September 1, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/play-vs-sports/>]

Play vs. Sports

Alton C. Thompson

As one who grew up in south-central Wisconsin, I quite “naturally” became a fan of the Green Bay Packers early on. And when the Boston Braves moved to Milwaukee in 1953, to become the Milwaukee Braves, I became a fan of the likes of Eddie Mathews, Hank Aaron, Del Crandall, and Warren Spahn. Even after the Braves left Milwaukee for Atlanta, I followed the careers of Hank Aaron and Rico Carty.

Until rather recently, I would have been unable to grasp the possibility that there was nothing “natural” about sports. For I quickly learned that all “real men” are sports fans (“fan” being short for “fanatic”!) who are driven by their genes to engage in sports; and driven to become sports spectators once their bodies have begun to deteriorate.

My recent reading of *Wild Justice*, [1] however, has made me question this assumption, enabling me to perceive the fact that all sports involve *competition* and, as such, reflect the needs of our society much more than “human nature.” If anything, in fact, rather than sports being *compatible* with “human nature,” they are *antagonistic* toward it—with play, rather, being more “in tune” with “human nature.”

I have put “human nature” in quotes here because it is a somewhat tricky concept. As I argue in Chapter 2 of my [What Are Churches For?](#), a co-development of humans as biological entities and the gatherer-hunter way of life occurred prior to the Agricultural Revolution of 10,000 years ago; and that although biologically (i.e., in physical characteristics and behavioral tendencies) we humans are basically the same now as we were 10,000 years ago, our ways of life today (except for those tribal peoples that we haven’t killed off!) differ substantially from a gatherer-hunter way of life. In that chapter I refer to that difference as a “discrepancy,” and note some of its implications.

Here, however, I wish to note that the development of “civilization” means that our behaviors today are only in part a result of innate proclivities (a point that I develop in my [“Obstacles to the Good Society: Supposed and Actual”](#)). In addition to—and often acting in *opposition* to—those proclivities are behavioral tendencies stemming from *societal* needs that have developed. Since even before the time of Adam Smith [1723 – 1790], competition started to become a feature of the economy, and competition came to be valued, and therefore “preached”—especially by those who benefited from it! [2]

But competition didn't remain confined to the realm of economic activity; it spread to other realms as well, resulting, e.g., in the rise to dominance of competitive sports. That rise has been particularly ominous, for competitive sports have been acting as a vehicle for spreading the religion of competition. In fact, sports—professional ones in particular—have become a *propaganda tool* in our society in that they “tell” (subliminally) us (the utter lie!) that the fairness that prevails in *sports* (because of the presence of referees) simply reflects the fairness that prevails in the *society at large*.

Having reached this conclusion, this means that I shouldn't watch the Milwaukee Brewers play St. Louis tonight, or the Packers or Wisconsin Badgers play football this fall. However, I recall that Ralph Waldo Emerson [1803 – 1882] once stated that “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,” so now I don't have to feel guilty about watching those three teams!^[3] I believe that I'm “mature” enough (at 71 years) to be able to continue to be a sports fan while simultaneously recognizing their propaganda role in our society! Besides, I believe that sports help bring people together, and therefore play *some* role of value.

But I'm getting off the track here, and need to return to my reason for writing this essay—which was to argue the superiority of play over sports. In doing so, I have been somewhat influenced by the *Wild Justice* book referred to earlier, and will evince such influence by approaching the subject from an evolutionary standpoint.

I suspect that the *reasons* for engaging in play, as well as the *nature* of play itself, vary with species. In the case of humans, I would make the following assertions as to *why* play developed:

- As humans developed intellectually, brain size grew to a point necessitating “premature” births.
- This meant that the young required, for their survival, a period of care before they could be “on their own.”
- But even after the young were old enough to take care of themselves, they were not required for adult activities, and therefore had “time on their hands.”
- That fact, combined with an innate need for physical activity, resulted in the young developing “games.”
- They were motivated to continue to do so by the fact that play is fun! Why? Because during play, dopamine tends to get released from the brain, giving a sense of pleasure to those participating in it. (*Wild Justice*, p. 120)

To a degree, play might involve an emulation of “grown-up” activities (p. 117), but I think it more likely that the play activities that developed were based more on imagination than observation (of adult activities). Given this, I expect that different groups developed different sorts of play activities, and that with a given group play activities changed somewhat over time.

The play activities that developed would not warrant the label “sports,” because competition likely was not involved—for play activities have no *purpose*. If play activities are not competitive, neither, however, are they “cooperative” as commonly understood? For we usually use the word “cooperative” in conjunction with the performance of *purposive* tasks. However, it would appear that play activities *prepared* (and *potentially* prepare) one for future cooperative activities (upon attaining adult status).

Although play activities may not have been purposive, it does not follow from that fact that they had—and have—no *effects*. Indeed, it seems clear that play has both individual and collective effects. At the individual level, play:

- Allows one to become physically fit.
- Allows one to express emotions, thereby contributing to one’s mental health.
- Helps one develop a sense of self, and enables one in self-discovery.
- Promotes creativity in thought.
- Helps one learn to interact with others in a harmonious manner.
- Helps one learn to “read” others, and thereby better react to their verbal expressions and actions.
- Insofar as rule development occurs, helps one learn the concept of fairness.

At a group level play contributes to *group cohesiveness*, and a sense of one’s being a part of the group. From a negative standpoint, however, it may contribute to “we-they” thinking, with the “they” being a lesser sort of being, not deserving of the same level of respect and treatment as other “we” individuals.

We usually think of play activity as being for “kids” only, but I would like to suggest that some adult activities can involve “serious play.” What I have in mind here specifically is the Structured Interaction Group (SIG) discussed in my *What Are Churches For?* eBook, cited earlier. Granted that this institution does not involve physical activity, for the physical activity that we *needed* for our development occurred while we were still children. But SIG participation can be *fun*, and in that sense can be thought of as involving play. But *serious* play.

Notes

1. Marc Bekoff and Jessica Pierce, *Wild Justice: The Moral Lives of Animals*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010.
2. It is still being preached, despite the fact that monopoly characterizes the economy.

3. My predictions: The Pack will repeat as Super Bowl champs, the Milwaukee Brewers will win the World Series, and the Wisconsin Badgers will be national champions this season in college football. [All of which turned out to be wrong! Good thing that I don't forecast the weather!—added March 25, 2012]

A Developmental Scenario

Alton C. Thompson

My object here is to develop a scenario that “explains” the development of human traits discussed by Dacher Keltner [1]: Kindness, embarrassment, smile, laughter, tease, touch, love, compassion, and awe. In the following I have been able to mention them all, except for embarrassment, but in several cases was not able to identify the specific mechanism involved. Perhaps I will be able to do so later.

The above nine topics form chapter headings in Keltner’s book. However, a major problem of the book is its lack of coherence—i.e., Keltner does not tie the topics together, except incidentally; and especially does he fail to tie them together in *developmental* terms. Thus, what I wish to do here is create a scenario of human development that works all nine topics into it in a plausible way. My starting point is our “ancestors,” without specifying a name for them or the distance in the past of my starting point. My objective here is not so much to provide an accurate history as to give the above nine topics some degree of coherence.

I need to state at the outset that although various selection mechanisms have played a role in human evolution (e.g., accidents, diseases, natural disasters), “natural selection,” as conceived by Charles Darwin, played no role whatsoever. Rather, the factors that played the major role in human evolution were (1) environmental change, (2) predation, and (3) sexual selection; and the discussion below focuses just on the latter two. In addition, I need to emphasize that an individual with given genes will not *thereby* develop having certain characteristics: the nature of one’s upbringing also plays a huge role (as the case of “feral” humans indicates).

I begin by assuming that the “ancestor” in question was a mammal (of course!), meaning that the young, to survive, need a period of weaning on mother’s milk before they will be able to fend for themselves. I also assume that virtually all mothers have a genetic proclivity to provide that necessary care to their young. There may be exceptions, but those exceptions have no descendants.

I also assume the existence of two sexes, with members of each equipped with a sex drive. With males I assume that this drive is continual, with females it is strongest during that short period during the month when she is fertile. I assume that female-choice sexual selection occurred at this time, but that females were not particularly selective in choosing which males to mate with; whatever criteria were used had little in the way of survival value for themselves or their young.

I assume that the ancestor is subject to predation, so that survivors will tend to have certain characteristics in particular: an ability to sense the near presence of predators (see, hear, smell); quick reactions, so that when a predator is sensed, a reaction occurs virtually immediately; given

that I assume the ancestor to be a “flight” creature, I assume that speed and agility will help the individual survive; I assume that the ancestor had recently emerged from the trees (i.e., formerly was a tree dweller), and that initially an ability to climb trees was an aid to survival; finally, I assume that intelligence was a factor that aided survival—in that it enabled the individual to know where predators might be present, so that such areas could be avoided; it enabled the individual to determine beforehand what it would do if it sensed the presence of a predator;. Etc.

I assume that over time intelligence grew in importance as a survival tool—in part because the other factors had reached their limit in development, leaving only intelligence to develop further. The more intelligent the female, the greater her prospects of surviving; and as her intelligence increased, she began more and more to choose to mate mainly with that male she perceived as most intelligent. As a result, the offspring born tended to have high intelligence, so that a tendency for increasing intelligence for the species became apparent.

As this was occurring, a point was reached where increasing head size (to accommodate the increased brain size) necessitated births that were more and more premature. Given that most mothers had an inborn proclivity to care for their young, mothers now had a longer period of time that needed to be used to provide that care. This presented two problems to her: It was now more difficult for her to engage in the gathering (for sustenance) that she needed to engage in; it made it more difficult to protect herself and her young from predators. (Usually, she would have just one child at a time, but multiple births would occur on occasion.)

These facts made her fussier in her choice of whom to mate with; thus, that male that exhibited a willingness to provide her with food and protection from predators became preferred for mating purposes. Some of these males “found” that their provision of such help—such KINDNESS—“magically” added to their own sense of well-being, so that sensing this, they were motivated—for “selfish” reasons—to continue providing such help. This not only enabled them to satisfy their sexual drive (necessary for the continuation of the species), but enabled them—through their helping behavior—to feel good. (Note that in *being* good they felt “good”! [2]) That is, in *doing* good, certain physiological processes are automatically activated which result in one *feeling* “good.” Indeed, this feeling may be stronger in the giver than the givee! And with growing intelligence, the sexual act tended to become less and less a mechanical matter—an activity that resulted from a drive—than an activity that produced an intense feeling of pleasure; thus developed the feeling of LOVE, which feeling helped bind a man to a woman more strongly than it had before. (But what was the specific mechanism that led to this development?)

The males referred to in the above paragraph not only engage in certain activities, but become members of the group. The initial group consisted of mother and child (or children, if multiple births). The group then expands by the female children remaining with the mother while the male children leave the “nest” to fend for themselves—perhaps joining a group of other males. At a still later point an adult male joins the group, providing food and protection to group members. And other adult males may join the group to pair-bond with the female children, now

mature—all of these adult males having been selected for inclusion in the group by the adult females already present. They did not select themselves: thus, although the group may have a harem-like appearance, it is not that at all.

As the group grows in size, and acquires more male adult members, there is likely to be some conflict among these males. The interaction that occurs may involve some aggression, but is more likely to be of a playful nature, such that any given male soon learns his position in this hierarchy. The lower-ranking males tend to develop the SMILE as a way of signaling that they “recognize” their position; this becomes “hardwired” in them, but it is by no means clear how this occurs.

The group has plenty of “free” time—for acquiring the necessary food for sustenance doesn’t take much of their time, and one thing done during this time is communicating with others in the group. This can involve recounting past events, planning future behaviors (especially having a sustenance purpose), preparing for future behaviors, etc. Perhaps the recounting of past events especially lends itself to bringing in humorous twists, which causes LAUGHTER. (But how did this response become hardwired in them?) And the laughter resulting in involuntary physiological responses that made members of the group feel “good”—and connected to other members. That is, laughing, resulted in a general feeling of solidarity—an in-group feeling. Also, free time was used for playing—this probably most common with the younger members of the group; and this helped build feelings of solidarity with them. The playing likely involved both TEASING and TOUCHING, which activities further contributed to “good” feelings and a sense of solidarity.

At some point intelligence would have developed to a point where individuals were capable of having a feeling of AWE, and did—especially in viewing certain sights in nature: a vista, a certain behavior in animals that was repeated on a seasonal basis, etc.

The “good” feeling that resulted in engaging in helping behavior had a corollary: When one observed another (even a member of another species) in pain, one could oneself feel that pain (“mirroring”). To reduce that feeling of pain, one felt impelled to do what one could to reduce the pain in the other. (But how did this reaction arise?! By what mechanism did it arise?) What I am referring to here is a feeling of empathy, or COMPASSION. And this feeling, combined with the use of one’s intellect, “caused” one to feel sympathy in cases where one *learned* about pain in others, but was not *observing* it.

Notes:

1. Dacher Keltner, *Born to be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009.

2. Related to this point, if one learns (e.g., hears or reads) about someone doing good deeds, one will oneself—if a normal person—feel “good.” In fact, one will feel “good” even if the good is done by an animal—as the case of [Jasmine](#) indicates.

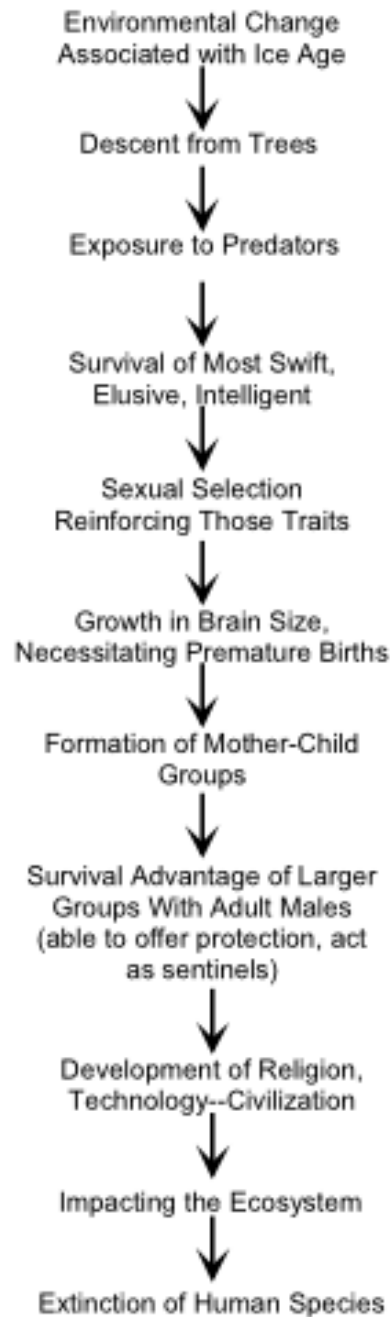
[September 2, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/the-irony-of-world-history/>]

The Irony of World History

Alton C. Thompson

The following brief history of humankind notes that environmental change enabled the emergence of humans (see Steven M. Stanley's *Children of the Ice Age*, 1996), and environmental change resulting from human activities may spell the end of our species! Let's hope this doesn't occur; better yet, let's try to prevent it! (Note that my scenario makes no reference whatsoever to Darwin's concept of "natural selection.")

A Brief History of Humankind



[September 7, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/the-who-what-where-of-global-warming-response/>]

The “Who-What-Where” of Global Warming Response

Alton C. Thompson

In the long run . . . the pressure of changing material circumstances will have to shape the lines of human conduct, on pain of extinction. [1]

The basic argument of my [*What Are Churches For?*](#) is that:

- Global warming threatens our continued existence as humans—to the point that our species (along with many other ones, of course) will be close to extinction by 2100 CE, if not actually so.
- Global warming is a “fruit” of our *societal system(s)*—as are virtually all of our problems (indirectly, if not directly). That is, the sorts of societal system we have “naturally” produces a variety of problems—with different types of problems arising at different times, historically—so that virtually all of the problems we humans have at present are, in principle, traceable to the nature of our societal system(s). Our *Western* societal systems, to be more specific.
- It follows, then, that were the *right* sort of societal system change to occur, virtually all of our problems would fade away.
- Such is not only *conceivable*, but *possible*.

More specifically, in this e-book I:

- Present some basic facts regarding global warming (Chapter 5).
- Introduce the concepts of “human design specifications” and “discrepancy” (Chapter 2).
- Present a variety of ideas regarding “human design specifications” (Chapters 3 and 4).
- Discuss the nature of the “good society” (Chapter 6).
- Present some ideas as to “how to get there” (Chapters 7 and 8).

- Suggest (the novel idea!) that the churches could play an important role in humankind’s “salvation” (Chapter 9).

I “set up” the discussion by noting that:

- A certain Tradition can be detected in Western history (Preface).
- That Tradition should be viewed as not only of historical/academic interest, but as a Tradition that needs to be continued, and even *extended* (Introduction).
- The Tradition has its roots in ancient Hebrew society (Chapter 1).

In brief, then, my e-book is about *why* we should continue—and, indeed, extend—that Tradition, and *how*—from different perspectives—that *can* be done.

If the presentation in *What Are Churches For?* has somewhat of a “philosophical” orientation, then the present essay is more of a “nuts and bolts” variety—but only relatively so. In addition, although the topic of “human design specifications” was an important one in the e-book, the focus in this essay is on global warming—and my approach is “journalistic,” in that the questions I address are “who?,” “what?,” “when?,” “how?,” “where?,” and “why?” What my answers have in common, however, is that all are concerned with the matter of *responding* to the threat of global warming.

What, specifically, has motivated the writing of this essay is the recent recognition, on my part, that (a) my interpretation of “responding” (to the threat of global warming) is such that physical *construction* would be required, and that (b) construction necessarily involves *architectural decisions*. This is an obvious point, of course; but given that I have approached (in the e-book) the problem of global warming from a *sociological-psychological* perspective, it is a point that received inadequate attention in the e-book. Therefore, my intention in this essay is not only to address the six “journalistic” questions identified above, but to do so with an architectural perspective in mind.

In no way am I a Frank Lloyd Wright [1867 – 1959], however. Like Wright, I was born in Wisconsin (Wright was born in Richland Center—my wife’s home town); and although I am from a construction family (e.g., my dad was a carpenter), I have had little interest in architecture over the years, and have done little reading in the architectural literature. I have, however, just completed reading James Wines’s *Green Architecture*[2]—and have discovered that Wines is not very hopeful about the human future. He states, e.g. (p. 233):

The entrenched systems controlling every aspect of human survival and its interactions with the environment are such that escape is virtually impossible without rejecting (or at least modifying) most of the high-energy demand conveniences associated with food supply, disposable products, temperature control, vehicular mobility, and communications technology. It is doubtful that any

significant trends toward reduced expectations are imminent, unless, of course, that final Armageddon prophesied by science actually takes place and settles the score for eternity.

I agree with Wines that we humans are in a dire situation at present, but—commenting specifically on his reference to “reduced expectations”—would remind him of Thorstein Veblen’s [1857 – 1929] brilliant observation of nearly a century ago, “. . . invention is the mother of necessity . . .”[3] What this observation suggests is that if and when one *recognizes* (regarding material things) that much of what one has acquired and uses stems from societally-based motives (such as purchasing something simply because it is new, or to “keep up with the Joneses,” etc.), rather than an actual need, one may come to realize that “dispensing with” does not necessarily involve “giving up.” So that, potentially, *education* can play a role in “reducing expectations.”

As I suggested above, don’t look to this essay for any great architectural ideas. I need to add, however, that neither do architects have such ideas, apparently (!); for as Wines has noted (p. 226), “In the larger picture, green architecture is still nothing more than band-aid treatment where major surgery is required.” Which declaration suggests that Wines agrees with me on the point that only societal system change—of the right sort—will solve our various problems?

In the ensuing discussion I will offer a few *building* ideas (I hesitate to dignify them with the label “architecture ideas”!), but will also suggest that help be sought from professional architects (ones who are educators might be the best prospects, along with their students). However, such advice should be used with caution because such individuals tend to take the Existing Order as a “given,” and therefore do not think in terms of societal system change. And even architects such as Wright, with his [Broadacre City](#) idea, may suggest changing the *spatial structure* of the society, but do so within the context of the Existing Order.

Let me now proceed to address the six journalistic questions that I promised to address earlier, beginning with *why?*—i.e., why respond to the phenomenon of global warming? (I add this qualification here because in addressing the other five questions—such as where?—it is necessary to provide justification, i.e., answer the *why?* question there as well.)

Why?

I am 71, a father, and a grandfather (with a fourth granddaughter expected at any time now). I love my children and grandchildren, and have, therefore, attempted to do all in my power to ensure that they have a decent life. My recent efforts, however, have been more driven by the hope that they, and *their* children, have *life* itself. But my concern is not just with them, but with others’ children as well. I suspect that James Lovelock is correct in projecting that by 2100 CE the earth’s population will be reduced by at least 80%. And if that projection comes to pass, it means that *most* of us will have no descendants living in 2100 CE. This is not a pleasant possibility to think about, but think about we must—and also *do* what we can to “save” as many humans as possible (while also working to save other species).

A question that one can rightly raise, however, is: If the humans living in 2100 CE (if there are any!) must be faced with the sorts of problems that we have today, is humankind *worth* saving? My inclination is to answer that question in the negative. However, given that what I propose, as a solution, is societal system change (of the right sort), and such change could reduce our current problems to nothingness, I would simply tell one who asks that question: “You are asking an irrelevant question, from my perspective!”

Who?

The process of societal system change would need to begin with *someone*, and I suggest that that “someone” be a small group of individuals. In Chapter 7 of my e-book I suggested a 5-“wave” scenario/strategy, with the first two “waves” consisting of retirees—i.e., people with incomes independent of incomes. That suggestion was first made in an article that I wrote, published in 1984; today, the economic situation with retirees is more uncertain, and that is one reason why I would now expand the group of “pioneers”—i.e., the *vanguard*—to include all of those who share my beliefs that (a) global warming is real, (b) we have many other problems currently besides global warming, (c) those problems are rooted in the nature of our societal system, and (d) therefore, societal system change is needed.

Individuals having such characteristics perhaps fall into two categories: (a) those in a position to proceed to work for societal system change, and (b) those not in such a position, but willing to provide financial, architectural, etc., support to those in the “vanguard” group. An additional characteristic desirable in members of this vanguard is conviction of such strength that they are willing to devote the rest of their lives to this cause.

What?

If this vanguard has as its “mission” working for societal system change, what should that mean in more concrete terms? The answer that I provide in Chapter 6 of the e-book is that they should create small cooperative eco-communities (CECs) that are as self-sufficient as possible. I recognize that over time the New Society being created would “evolve” in various respects, e.g., each CEC would develop one or more specialties, and thereby become less self-sufficient. But the *initial* goal for members of the vanguard should be to strive for *complete* (economic) self-sufficiency for the CECs created. Strictly speaking, this would mean (a) using only building materials derived from the site chosen for a given CEC, (b) constructing the CEC’s buildings using only tools created on-site, and (c) “operating” the CEC, once built, without any reliance on the Larger Society.

In effect, what I am saying here is that those entering the chosen site to begin construction should take nothing in with them, the sole exception being their clothes. This would not, of course, be possible. But my point here is that the members of this vanguard should be mindful of this self-sufficiency principle, so that even if they are unable to follow it well at the beginning, they strive to move in that direction over time (during the early stages of the Movement, at any rate).

Energy usage is the primary source of “greenhouse” gases in the atmosphere, because most energy is derived from fossil fuels—the use of which involves transferring carbon from below the earth’s surface to the atmosphere. A CEC would use energy, but only that derived from “replaceable” sources such as wood, flowing water, and biofuels. Initially, electricity from the “grid” might be depended upon, but the goal would be to become self-sufficient in electricity production at some future point in time.

Where does architecture enter the picture? Besides following the above principles, those involved in this New Society Movement should try to make their CEC as *attractive* as possible. Granted that this a subjective principle—but it is an important one, for the point here is not just to create a few CECs, but “oodles“ (is that a word?!) of them. To succeed at that goal, it will be necessary to create CECs that appeal to the esthetic tastes of Americans (referring here just to residents of the United States). In other words, I insist on being *pragmatic* about matters of design. As for myself, I find Wright’s “Falling Water” and the Garden at the Royal Palace of Katsura appealing (pictured on, respectively, pp. 23 and 237 of the Wines book). Ideas from professional architects could, of course, be most helpful in making esthetic—among other—decisions of an architectural nature.

As I make clear in the e-book, however, what I want most particularly regarding CECs is that their residents are devoted to the well-being of each and every member; so that for “outsiders,” what especially attracts them to a CEC is their knowledge of that fact. It goes without saying that discriminatory practices would not be used in deciding who to accept for membership in a given CEC. This does not mean, however, that occasions might not arise necessitating the expulsion of certain members.

When?

ASAP!

Where?

Given the various atmospheric phenomena associated with global warming (in addition to a warming trend, of course), CECs should be created away from coasts (especially ones that are now subject to hurricanes), and high enough above streams that any flooding that occurs will not affect them. In addition, sites should be chosen away from major cities—for self-protection against desperate people leaving major cities; and away from areas likely to subject to drought—with its associated wildfires.

Once a general location has been chosen, one should look for sites that are wooded (not only for wood to burn, but to enable gathering and hunting), sites that provide building materials (not only wood, but clay, rocks, etc.), sites that enable earth-sheltered structures, etc.

The initial CEC likely would have a very small population (I would advise this), but those creating it should have an intention for the CEC to expand to perhaps an eventual high of 200 – 500. Thus, in selecting a site, the ultimate size of the CEC is one of the considerations to be given attention.

Regardless of where a CEC is created, the land upon which it would be created would need to be *purchased*—despite the fact that that land had been *stolen* at an earlier period of time. Stolen, that is from the Native Americans who had “owned” it originally.

How?

In Chapter 8 of my e-book I recommend the creation of a somewhat novel institution, the Structured Interaction Group (SIG). I recommend this both as a *planning* tool, as well as a *governing* one (among other possibilities). In either case, for a SIG to “work,” it must be small in size, so I recommend a size of about 12. As the discussion in that chapter makes clear, however, I do not think of such a group as one of *disciples*! Rather, I think of it as an egalitarian group within which there is mutual respect, and the absence of any tendencies for conformity.

In Chapter 9 I suggest the novel idea that the churches become institutions interested in humankind’s “salvation” (!)—and become sites for the creation and “running” of SIGs. Not that I would want to discourage the unchurched from also creating SIGs, and using them as vehicles for creating CECs. But—unlike Europe—the churches play an important role in American society, and—I’m convinced—*could* play a significant role in preventing our species from becoming extinct. The ball is now in their court!

Conclusions

Given that I’m convinced that societal system change—and in a cooperative eco-communitarian direction—would be both desirable and possible, lately I have been thinking of how I could better publicize my ideas. I thought, e.g., of trying to identify a fiction writer who might be willing to write a “utopian” novel based on my e-book (and have possibly found one). I’ve thought that it would be wonderful if I could interest Earl Hanmer (of *The Waltons*) in creating a television series based on the e-book (and have, in fact, sent him this essay by email).

I recently learned that Steven Spielberg and others will soon be initiating a new television series, *Terra Nova*, described this way on www.fox.com:

TERRA NOVA follows an ordinary family on an incredible journey back in time to prehistoric Earth as a small part of a daring experiment to save the human race. In the year 2149, the world is dying. The planet is overdeveloped and overcrowded, with the majority of plant and animal life extinct. The future of mankind is in doubt, and its only hope for survival is in the distant past.

What this suggests to me is that a television series based on my e-book is conceivable—and would certainly be of more value than *Terra Nova* (or even *Desperate Housewives*!).^[4] My problem is that I have no “connections” in either television or the movie industry.

Notes

1. Thorstein Veblen, *Absentee Ownership and Business Enterprise in Recent Times: The Case of America*. With Introduction by Robert Lekachman. Boston: Beacon Press, 1967, p. 17. First published by B. W. Huebsch, Inc., in 1923.
2. Edited by Philip Jodidio. Cologne, Germany: Taschen, 2008.
3. *The Instinct of Workmanship and the State of the Industrial Arts*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1964, pp. 314 and 316. First published by The Macmillan Company in 1914. A part of Veblen’s footnote on p. 316 reads, “. . . the aphorism often cited, that ‘Necessity is the Mother of Invention,’ appears to be nothing better than a fragment of uncritical rationalism.”
4. Also of relevance here is a movie currently playing, *Seven Days in Utopia* [Texas], starring Robert Duvall, and directed by Matt Russell. The movie is based on David L. Cook’s *Golf’s Sacred Journey: Seven Days at the Links of Utopia*, 2006.

[September 8, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/two-perspectives-on-survival/>]

Two Perspectives on Survival

Alton C. Thompson

Years ago I read an article by economist [Armen A. Alchian](#) [1914 -] that, at the time, impressed me as of great significance. I don't remember the title of the article, or remember where the article appeared;[1] but what I *do* remember about the article is that he (allegedly) brought in a Darwinian concept as an alternative to the conventional Economics perspective.

As I recall Alchian's "message," he noted that conventional Economics thinking takes as a "given" a certain situation, and that an Entrepreneur then enters the picture, analyzes that situation, makes a series of rational decisions (regarding *what* to produce (or sell), *how*, and *where*), and then proceeds to establish his (not her!) business firm. That firm will then be successful by virtue of the fact that a series of rational decisions had been made. Had the Entrepreneur in question determined that a profit would *not* have been possible, he would not have established a firm; so that the very fact that he decided to *establish* a firm meant that he "knew" it would make a profit (i.e., be successful)—and it would in fact be.

Alchian recognized that such a conclusion was based on assumptions that were merely that—*assumptions*. Assumptions which, in point of fact, "obviously" lacked in realism. Recognizing this fact, he wished to present a more realistic "picture," and in doing so chose to use what he perceived was a Darwinian perspective.

In doing so, he assumed (if my memory is correct—which, at age 71, is doubtful!) a situation where firms of a type were distributed at random through a hypothetical area, and assumed that the Entrepreneurs involved were not rational decision-makers, all possessing perfect knowledge. Rather, he assumed for these decision-makers that they varied in knowledge, intelligence, and motivation, and then asked: Will they, *therefore*, all fail?

Alchian's answer: There is an *adaption* perspective on the economy (i.e., the conventional view), and then there is an *adoption* view—the one that Alchian was about to offer as an alternative to the first view. With the *adoption* view, the success of a firm is dependent on the Entrepreneur's "just happening" to make the right decisions—regarding what to produce, how, and where. Thus, if we examine our hypothetical situation of firms scattered at random, with Entrepreneurs who do not fit the model of Economic Man, from that latter fact we cannot conclude that all—or most—will fail. Rather, those who have "just happened" to make the right decisions will succeed (to varying degrees); those who have not done so will fail.

Alchian refers to this as a Darwinian view, a matter that I disagree with, but that fact is “neither here nor there” for the purposes of the present essay. Rather, I use the “adoptionist” perspective in thinking about the Cooperative Eco-Community (CEC, see Chapter 6 of my [*What Are Churches For?*](#)).

In my recent “[The ‘Who-What-Where’ of Global Warming Response](#)” I continue my theme of “humankind’s salvation,” but adopt an architecture perspective. In doing so, I argue that for a CEC Movement to be successful, it is necessary that CECs be “attractive”—and from two perspectives. On the one hand, they should be “attractive” from a sociological-psychological standpoint—given that we live in an individualistic society, so that one cannot expect most Americans to be “naturally” attracted to CEC living. On the other hand, however, I argue that a CEC should be “attractive” from an *architectural* standpoint, so that its attractiveness from a sociological-psychological standpoint will be *reinforced*.

Now, some readers may have noticed an apparent discrepancy (an ironic term to use, given Chapter 2 in my e-book!) in my thinking: Given that James Lovelock has convinced me that by 2100 CE there will be few (if any!) humans still in existence, why on earth do I keep insisting on writing about *societal* system change! Does not my figure on p. 146 in fact suggest that that I believe that everyone in our society can be “saved”? Doesn’t this prove that I’m a hopeless schizophrenic, who says, on the one hand, that we are doomed, and then turns around and says that we’re not?!

Well, I don’t claim to have “all of my marbles”—but, on the other hand, I have not been institutionalized (yet!). *Is* it possible to reconcile my two disparate viewpoints—and in a way that brings in Alchian’s perspective? I believe there is.

It seems to me that what James *Lovelock*’s view of the human future suggests is something rather different from what Lovelock *actually* suggests. Lovelock suggests that the problem potentially has a “technological fix”—a suggestion that I reject out of hand. In part because I think there’s a better solution, in part because such a “fix” would be limited in scope—in contrast to the solution that *I* offer.[2]

Lovelock’s perspective on the future suggests to *me*—and, I would like to think, many others (e.g., Peter Goodchild, whose many essays grace this web site)—that one should become a “survivalist” (as one of my correspondents would put it). I would agree with this position to some extent, but would insist that we approach this from a “communalistic” rather than “individualistic” standpoint. Note that a “survivalist” perspective, in its “pure” form, inadvertently draws upon “Alchianian” thinking in that it says that with global warming there will be survivors and there will be non-survivors—that’s just the way it is, learn to live with it.

I, however, am unable to adopt a “survivalist” perspective in that “pure” form, because I cannot escape two facts: (a) I have grandchildren, and (b) I come from a religious background—but one tempered by a “humanist” education and varied life experiences.

The fact that I have grandchildren motivates me to do what I can to ensure that *they* have a future. And my religious background forces me to recognize that I have *responsibilities*. (“Forces” is perhaps not the best choice of words here, given that I don’t perceive that “forcing” in a negative light—quite the contrary, in fact.) In *knowing*—and *accepting*—that I have responsibilities, I take for granted that those responsibilities must not be limited to members of my biological family.

I cannot say, with Will Rogers, that “I’ve never met a man I didn’t like.” But my religious background—and life experiences—have led me to believe that I must at least *try* to live by such a philosophy. As a result, I have tried to change my personality so that at the end of the day I can say, with honesty, that I have made no enemies, and have brought some degree of joy to at least one person. Given that I have made a conscious effort to transform myself (to the point where it now “comes naturally”), I find that despite my acceptance of Lovelock’s prognosis for the human future, I simply *cannot* accept the possibility that few of our descendants will see 2100 CE. For that reason, I find that I simply *must* continue to believe that “salvation” is possible for at least some members of our species.

But there is also a *pragmatic* reason for a commitment to that conviction: If no attempt is made to “save” others, just oneself and one’s kin, one may find oneself in a situation—in 20 years? in 30 years?—such that desperate people are knocking at your door, and you are faced with two choices—either shoot them, or let them in, and give them food and shelter.

The first of these is not a good choice; thus, to avoid being faced with that eventuality, I suggest that those of us concerned about the human future join in trying to do what we can to “save” our species (not slighting other species, however, in so doing).

Notes

1. I believe, however, that the article in question was “Uncertainty, Evolution, and Economic Theory,” *The Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 58, no. 3 (June 1950), pp. 211 – 221, available on the site for which a link is provided above. To the best of my recollection, while I was taking a price theory (i.e., microeconomics) course at the University of North Carolina years ago, this article was one of the assigned articles to read in a readings book. On the other hand, however, I may have been led to Alchian’s article from an article by [Charles M. Tiebout](#) [1924 – 1968] concerning location theory, while taking a course in Location Theory in the Geography Department while at UNC.
2. By the way, if you are not a “believer” in global warming, I suggest that you read [this article](#), among many other possibilities.

[September 9, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/more-reasons/>]

More Reasons

Alton C. Thompson

That is, reasons in addition to the ones identified in Chapter 6 of my [What Are Churches For?](#) in favor of creating Cooperative Eco-Communities—for, in fact, moving our society in an eco-communitarian direction. In this essay I identify two additional reasons, the first being one that relates to a debate initiated by the publication of Barry Commoner's *The Closing Circle* in 1971.

In the May 1972 issue of the [Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists](#) Paul R. Ehrlich and John P. Holdren present a "Critique" (p. 16 ff.) of the book, with Commoner providing a "Response" (p. 17 ff.) to their comments. I make no attempt here to summarize the arguments of these gentlemen, except to note that a conclusion that can be drawn from their discussion is that three factors are involved with the environmental impact of humans:

- Population—its absolute size, and its rate of growth.
- Affluence—in that the richer the country (or individual, for that matter), the more energy usage is likely to be associated with it (production of goods, transportation of people and goods, heating/cooling of structures), and thus the more pollution, given the current reliance on fossil fuels in most places for energy generation.
- Technology—in that some technologies result in more efficient energy usage than others (in using fossil fuels), and technological developments can result in the use of other than fossil fuels as sources of energy (e.g., wind, water, nuclear, biofuels).

At a given point in time (at present), the higher a *household's* income, the greater its environmental impact is likely to be; and at a *national* level, the richer a country, the greater its "contribution" to the global warming problem, and the larger its population, the greater its (deleterious) impact on the environment. If we bring in the time dimension, however (and are referring now to countries), the *rate* of population growth becomes a factor so that, *ceteris paribus*, the greater that rate, the greater the environmental impact.

What the above discussion suggests for *individual households*, in addressing the problem of global warming is that they:

- Consume as little possible of *purchased* goods (i.e., goods that likely involved pollution in their manufacture, and also involved pollution in their transportation, storage, etc.),

and instead try to maximize their own production, while being conscious of fossil fuel energy usage (direct and indirect) in doing so.

- Keep their family size low—i.e., ideally no more than two or three children. However, if one already has more than that number, keep the “excess”!—and please don’t feel guilty about it. For example, don’t feel that you must give up some for adoption! A friend of mine has 11 children, and because he and his wife are great parents, the world is a better place, those 11 children notwithstanding.

What the above discussion suggests for a *society* (or a cooperative eco-community, CEC) is that:

- It attempt (using humane measures, of course) to keep its rate of population growth small, especially if its “base” is already large.
- It attempt a rapid switchover to energy sources other than fossil fuels—but also other than nuclear energy, which presents its own set of problems.

The reader may very well ask why I neglected to add “work for societal system change, in a cooperative eco-communitarian direction” to this latter list, but my answer is: “One would need to be a rather naïve person to do so!” The rational expectation to have for governmental leaders—controlled, as they are, by the economic elite—is that they will *not*:

- Work to reduce the “standard of living” in their country. That is, work to reduce growth in the Gross National Product—by discouraging consumption.
- Give serious attention to developing technology that would enable a switchover—rapid or otherwise—from fossil fuels to “safe” ones.
- Work to bring about societal system change in a cooperative eco-communitarian (CEC) direction.

Thus, if significant progress is to be made in addressing the problem of global warming, it would be foolish to look to government (a pathetic commentary on government!), so that the “way out” is actions by individuals acting either as individuals or as members of a group. Which is why I favor the creation of CECs.

Given that the factors “behind” the problem of global warming are (a) population growth, (b) “affluence,” and (c) technological inadequacy, and that I perceive the initial CECs created as striving for the highest possible (or reasonable) degree of self-sufficiency, *that* fact has as an implication that the “affluence” factor would be addressed by the mere fact of CEC creation. Let me now add, however, that the CEC *also* provides an environment conducive to population control—in the sense of lowering the birth rate. A CEC would, of course, have the objective of

growing in size—only to a certain absolute limit, however; but in doing so, it should attempt to meet that goal by drawing “outsiders” in, not working for a high birth rate. And given that I expect any CEC to develop a feeling of “community,” with certain *mores* (such as favoring a low birth rate) being established and “enforced,” I suspect that it would be fairly easy for CECs to maintain a low birth rate.

Residents of a CEC could make a contribution not only by their lack of “affluence” and choice of keeping the birth rate in them low, but also by engaging in efforts to develop “safe” energy sources, such as biofuels. Of course, some CECs might contain individuals interested in, and capable of, developments in that area, and other CECs might not. I would, however, encourage those CECs with the former sort of members to pursue this goal—recognizing that they might be limited in their abilities here by a lack of financial resources.

If, then, one additional reason for favoring the CEC as a solution (insofar as that’s possible!) to the global warming problem is that the CEC environment lends itself to population control more readily than the environment of the Larger Society, then a second additional reason is that this solution would address a feature of our society, as it is currently, that is (I’m convinced) an unrecognized source of many of our problems. The fact that it is unrecognized (because it is so easy to regard as a mere “given,” and therefore a part of “the nature of things”) means, of course, that little research has been directed at this feature; in fact, I am not aware of *any* such research. I’m convinced, nonetheless, that this feature of our society—with our society not being alone on this, by any means!—is a source of many problems. I will not deny that it may also have positive elements, but in this essay will focus just on possible *negative* aspects.

What I’m referring to here are the facts that (a) the family—or household, for the census people—is our basic societal unit, and (b) very few families in our society—most societies, in fact—are self-sufficient. What these facts imply is that unless one has grown up in a family that has a family business (or has “connections”), when one reaches a certain age, one is “on one’s own.” Before one reaches that status one may have received an education with the financial support of one’s parents (perhaps in conjunction with scholarships and/or loans), but once one has completed one’s education, one is “on one’s own.” Meaning that one must now find some means of supporting oneself.

In the “olden days,” if one was a female, one’s only concern was attracting a potential mate—who would then “solve” one’s “on one’s own” problem for one. (If this didn’t work out well, one’s life could be hell, and some succumbed to mental illness—or “disposed” of their spouse!) Today, it is more common for females to receive educations (even more so than with males, currently), and to seek employment for a time before thinking about marriage—or to seek employment with the intention of making a career out of it. But employment opportunities do not always match the demand for them—as our current situation in the United States makes

perfectly clear. And if one is not able to acquire employment, one has a problem! (Which is not to say that if one does find employment, that one will not encounter problems in the workplace!) Historically, the burden of “getting a job” has fell especially on males. So that whereas until recently the stress place on young females was that of finding a mate—and then putting up with the beast after marriage!—the stress placed on males for centuries now has been that of “finding work” out there in the workplace. In many cases, the search for a job has been successful. But where it has not, it has led to depression and other illness—and criminal behavior in some cases. Of course, some have responded to the need to “get a job” by starting their own businesses—and some have succeeded in doing so, some failed.

It would seem that businesses that succeed are a “good thing” for the person starting the business—and I will not argue otherwise. I *would* argue, however, that the fact that some feel *forced* to start a business—because they feel they have no other choice—may very well have *negative* consequences for the society.

It’s true that this phenomenon may result in the creation of entirely new businesses—which some might, and perhaps rightly, regard as a positive development. However, the “negative” I perceive here is that it tends to contribute to the *materialism* of our society. It seems to me that we are already far too materialistic (which, from a global warming standpoint, means pollution!), and that this situation in our society which virtually “forces” individuals to start businesses, simply adds to our materialism and, thereby, global warming problem.

If, rather than growing up in the Larger Society, one were to grow up in a CEC, one would have *security* that the Larger Society does not offer—and, as a consequence, would *feel* secure. One would never fear unemployment, neither would one ever feel under any pressure to start a business. I assume that any CEC would, however, not only have *community-owned* economic activities, but would also allow residents to have their own (small) businesses, if they chose to establish any. After all, a CEC would not be a prison! It would prize individuality and creativity, and would be Amish-like in being accepting of any changes that would not, in its residents’ judgment, change the character of the community.

Likely there are still other reasons for favoring the establishment of a CEC Movement ASAP, but the above is what occurs to me at the moment.

[September 15, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/another-set-of-more-reasons/>]

Another Set of “More Reasons”

Alton C. Thompson

The “[More Reasons](#)” in my title is, of course, an allusion to my recent essay with that title—an essay in which I argued that a Movement in a Cooperative Eco-Community (CEC) direction would be desirable from (a) population control and (b) security standpoints (the latter because I conceive the CEC as a “family of families”). My orientation in this essay, however, is different in that its focus is on the “Who?” of CEC residence/membership. As the title of my [What Are Churches For?](#) e-book *implies*, and Chapter 9 in it makes *explicit*, I see the churches as potentially playing a key role in transitioning our society in a CECian direction (argued in that e-book as necessary for humankind’s “salvation” from extinction via global warming).

Given this perspective, I use this essay to identify why I believe that the church people would be particularly suited to “lead the way” in this enterprise:

- If some of the members of a given church were to pursue this course, an advantage they would have is that they already know one another. Each would thereby have certain expectations regarding each other “pioneer,” so that interaction would be facilitated. Each would know each other’s strengths and weaknesses, and thus each would know how to “approach” each other person. A leadership pattern would emerge “naturally,” and in such a way that no hard feelings would arise—so that working together should not present difficulties.

One will likely, in so doing, learn certain facts about others in the group of which one was unaware, which facts—in being “surprises”—may lead to some tense moments. But enough solidarity should exist within the group, along with some members having diplomatic talents, that such unpleasant discoveries should be resolved fairly quickly. Of course, if one *tentatively* plans to join a given group, but anticipates potential conflict with one or more other potential members, a good way to resolve the difficulty is to wait until some other group forms!—and join it instead (if it appears to be more agreeable in its composition).

- With all residents of a given CEC being of the same “faith”—i.e., belonging to the same denomination—the matter of Sunday (or Saturday) “services” would not be a problem. (I prefer “meeting” to “service,” given that no service to others occurs during them!) The fact that they have *already* been meeting with each other on their day of “worship” would simply allow them to continue with this tradition, the difference now being that they would be interacting with fellow congregants *every day*, not just on Sundays (or

Saturdays, for some). If one finds that prospect unappealing, one should wait until another group forms, or pursue some other course—such as providing financial support to those who *have* taken the CECian course.

- Members of a given congregation would not only have in common that they know each other, but would have the *Bible* in common. This not only would give them a common set of stories, but a common authority. Granted that varying interpretations can be—and have been—given to the Bible, but the CEC residents from, e.g., a Presbyterian congregation would likely be less disputatious than a group of residents from *varying* denominations—including none. Given that harmony must exist within a group if it is to grow and develop as a successful group, and this is most likely to occur with a group of like-minded individuals—such as people from some given religious denomination—the fact of the residents being like-minded should serve those needs.

Please note that I am not encouraging segregation on a religious basis, only noting that the success of a CEC is likely to be heightened if its residents are like-minded. My hope is that the residents of a given CEC would not isolate themselves from their neighbors but, rather, would make an effort to interact with neighbors harmoniously—but without trying to gain converts to their “brand” of religion. If, on the other hand, “outsiders” demonstrate an interest in joining with them, such requests should be considered carefully.

- If residents of a given CEC are drawn from a single church congregation, an advantage is that others in the congregation who have *not* chosen the CECian course, but are sympathetic to it, may consent to help finance it—in terms of helping purchase the land needed for its building, the construction of buildings on that land, etc. Or may be able and willing to render assistance in other useful ways.
- Related to this point, if the congregation in question is not an independent one but, rather, is part of a *denomination*, denominational officers who recognize the wisdom of a CECian Movement may agree to supply funds to “pioneers,” to provide publicity for the Movement, etc. And if a *number* of CECs are created by members of a given denomination, denominational officers may provide communication and other sorts of services for “their” CECians.
- A CEC which has, e.g., Amish neighbors will have neighbors who are already living in an ecological responsible way. Such people can be valuable sources of knowledge and advice, and an effort should be made to “use” them (in a non-exploitative manner, of course) in that way. If the residents of a CEC have come from a Christian (or even Jewish) congregation, the fact that they have the Bible (or at least Hebrew Bible) in common should facilitate the establishment of cordial relationships with such neighbors.

Even if they are members of some other religion—such as Buddhism or Islam—that fact should be a “plus” for establishing cordial relationships with neighbors.

- I suspect that Christian churches having Native American tribal members as their dominant membership might be the most likely to perceive the desirability of a CECian Movement. With that fact in mind, I will be attending the religious service at the Indian Summer Festival on the Milwaukee lakefront tomorrow (September 11, 2011), in part to gain information about organizations to contact, here in Wisconsin in particular.[1]
- In Chapter 8 of my e-book I discuss the Structured Interaction Group (SIG) as vehicle for planning a CEC (among many other possibilities). I would now modify that suggestion by asserting that the SIG need not be used in such planning, but that SIG sessions be used through the week during the course of CEC construction and CEC living—with regular church services occurring in the CEC at whatever time (and day) is established by the CEC’s residents.

In concluding this essay I wish to make two points. First, I can think of at least one advantage in a CEC having a diverse population from a religious standpoint. That diversity would likely result in members of a given religion seeking a church of their denomination nearby, thereby giving them useful contact with the “outside” world. I say “useful” because such contact would convey to those in the Existing Order that these newcomers were “regular” people who posed no threat—perhaps doing the opposite, in fact.

Second, note that my principal point is not that *church-going* people are the best candidates to serve as the vanguard of a CEC Movement but, rather, that *like-minded* people are—with the qualification that I am referring to those individuals in that category who are (a) convinced regarding the reality of global warming, and who also (b) believe that the best “way out” is that of societal system change, in a Cooperative Eco-Communitarian direction.

Church-going people offer certain advantages so far as leading a Movement is concerned, as I indicate above. But the key qualities for that vanguard are commitment and like-mindedness—which leads me to the greatest “negative” that I perceive in church-goers: The likelihood that the vast majority of such people are so committed to the Existing Order, with many of them also having more of an orientation to an afterlife than life here-and-now, that few of them will be willing to accept the challenge. Thus, although I hold out some hope that many church-going people can be recruited for the Movement, I don’t want to give the impression that my interest is *only* in such people. Indeed, it’s entirely conceivable that non-church-goers—including some who are agnostics, and even atheists—will lead the way in humankind’s “salvation.” And I can think of no greater irony!

Note

1. While there, I hope that I am not subjected to blather about how Middle-eastern “terrorists” brought down the twin towers (including Building 7?!), how “wonderful” our military is, and other nonsense.

[September 14, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/toward-a-new-new-religion/>]

Toward a New New Religion

Alton C. Thompson

As the “Disclosure note” in (p. 4) my [What Are Churches For?](#) e-book indicates, I have had contact with a number of different Christian denominations during my lifetime to date, which experience has enabled me to perceive both the strengths and weaknesses of Christianity. My basic conclusion, however, is that the latter overshadow the former; so that, in consequence, it is time to begin thinking about abandoning Christianity in favor of something new.

Christianity receives its name, of course, from “[Christ](#)”—which is a *title*, not a *name*. Ostensibly it is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew title “Messiah,” which fact thereby suggests that Christianity is an extension of Judaism. That suggestion has some measure of truth to it, in that the “founder” of Christianity can be perceived as having been in the same tradition as individuals such as Amos and Micah—in being a reformer of the Judaism of his time. But the very claim that Christianity *had* a “founder” is open to question, in that Jesus’s “ministry” did not give rise to single movement, but several. As, e.g., Burton L. Mack stated in his *Who Wrote the New Testament: The Making of the Christian Myth*:^[1]

I will refer to the five groups [that I perceive] within the Jesus movement as (1) the Community of Q who produced the Sayings Gospel Q, (2) the Jesus school that produced the pre-Markan pronouncement stories, (3) the True Disciples who produced the Gospel of Thomas, (4) the Congregation of Israel who composed the pre-Markan sets of miracle stories, and (5) the Jerusalem Pillars about whom we have only an early report from Paul in his letter to the Galatians.

But although at least five “Jesuan” strands developed shortly after Jesus’s death, it’s not clear than any of them survived! What appears to have occurred, rather, is that either one of the original strands “morphed” into something quite different, or an entirely new strand developed—outside of Palestine—and displaced the original strands. At any rate, the version of “Jesuanism” that emerged to dominance was one that combined elements of Judaism with elements of the pagan [Mystery cults](#) that were popular in the Mediterranean Basin at the time. In a sense, the religion that emerged (i.e., “Christianity”) combined ethical principles drawn from Judaism with a belief system strongly influenced by the Mystery cults (as evidenced in the claim that Jesus was born of a virgin, was a “savior,” etc.). But although this new religion contained elements of both *orthopraxy* and *orthodoxy*, the latter came to greatly overshadow the former—a fact indicated in the so-called “[Apostles’ Creed](#).”^[2]

If my basic objection to Christianity is its basic dishonesty—in taking the religion *of* Jesus and converting it into a religion *about* Jesus—my second objection is one related to the first: The religion *of* Jesus was not (primarily) about historical *personages* but, rather, about *principles* of right living. Yet Christianity—the religion created in Jesus’s name—is clearly oriented *away* from those principles, and *toward* the person of Jesus. But even the personhood of Jesus is denied, in that the claim is made that Jesus’s birth was miraculous and that, in fact, he was the one-and-only Son of God (among the ideas borrowed from the Mystery cults—evidently to make the new religion potentially attractive to “gentiles”).

Yesterday (September 11, 2011), I attended the religious service at Indian Summer, a yearly festival held on the Milwaukee lakefront in early September, sponsored (in part) by the Forest County [Wisconsin] Potawatomi Foundation and The Oneida Nation. Although I was dismayed by the fact that the chorus sang, e.g., “Nothing But the Blood of Jesus”—a hymn that evinces clear Mystery cult influence—the aspects of the “service” to which I wish to draw attention are that (a) no mention was made of “terrorists” (allegedly) bringing down the twin towers—rather, the emphasis was on healing; and (b) attention was given to the four sacred directions.[3]

While attention was being given to the latter, it occurred to me that my own concept of religion (as presented in my e-book, and various essays on this site) has a “family resemblance” to Native American spirituality. In the e-book I use Chapter 1 to present my “take” on the (Christian) Bible, and in Chapter 4 discuss my conception of “human design specifications,” and in so doing do two things: (a) present a list (pp. 110 – 111) of desirable personal traits, and (b) discuss the salient features (pp. 113 – 117) of the Good Society, as I conceive it. The presentations in that chapter overlap significantly with the features that Native Americans associate with the various directions. For example, to draw upon [Cree](#) thinking on this, the following is associated with the seven directions:

East – the spiritual direction.

South – the emotional direction, with love, the family, and the community being values associated with this direction.

West – the physical and healing direction.

North – the mental direction, with wisdom and self-sacrifice associated with this direction.

Above – where Father Sky is present, watching over us.

Below – Earth Mother is at our feet, the source of all that we have.

Within – The Great Spirit “is in all of us. We are an essential part of life. We are life in action, loving, moving and growing. The sacred pipe touched to your heart, reaching within. Without you there is nothing.”

The overlap is, of course, not perfect, but “right living” is at the heart of Native American spirituality—not only in terms of how one relates to others, but also Earth below, and the Great Spirit above; I must admit that I sometimes I wish that I had been born a Native American rather than a white with a Christian heritage. Given that my educational background is especially in Geography, I find it easy to relate to a religion (or, more accurately, a *collection* of religions) that has (have) a spatial orientation. On the other hand, however, I suppose that it is fortunate that I have the background that I do—despite the fact that it’s not clear to me at present *why* that might be the case.

What *does* occur to me, though, that the new religion of Christianity (being, as it was, an offshoot of Judaism) might be “converted” into still another new religion (hence the “*new new*” of my title!), one that retains the ethical—the *orthopraxy*—element of Christianity, abandons the (obnoxious) *orthodoxy* part, and then grafts onto itself some version of Native American spirituality.

I already have an institution for use by this “*new new*” religion, the Structured Interaction Group (SIG), discussed in Chapter 8 of my e-book. What’s needed next is a “theology” for this new religion, and I nominate David Ray Griffin as the person to create it.

Notes

1. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995, pp. 44 – 45.
2. To claim that this creed originated with the disciples of Jesus is the height of dishonesty. Given that this creed is *belief*-oriented, it utterly misrepresents the “ministry” of Jesus, as reported in the gospels; and as such, it is inconceivable that Jesus’s disciples could have originated it.
3. Actually, there are seven; for in addition to north, east, south, and west, there are above, below, and here.

[September 16, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/societal-system-change-an-obstacle/>]

Societal System Change: An Obstacle

Alton C. Thompson

In my “[Obstacles to the Good Society: Supposed and Actual](#)” (Sections B and C), I identify claimed and actual obstacles to creating the Good Society, and in this essay would like to continue that discussion by identifying an additional *actual* obstacle. Let me begin, however, by making some background statements, by way of introduction.

Imagine, if you will, a 3-dimensional graph, with X – Y spatial dimensions, and a Z time dimension. A given person can now be represented on (actually, *in*) this graph as a line—having a beginning point, an end point (if deceased), that line having a certain position and length. If different individuals are so depicted on this graph, it will be noted that the lines vary in length, position, amount of spatial variation, etc. Whereas the graph depicts interesting, and perhaps useful, information, it is limited in that it depicts human individuals solely as *physical* entities.

In effect, the graph treats people as if they were mere lumps of lifeless matter—which, of course, they are not. Rather, they are sentient beings, equipped with various senses—that enable them to see, touch, hear, taste, smell, and have balance. The latter sense enables each to sit, stand, etc., and the first five senses enable them to *function*. These five senses enable individuals to receive “messages” from outside (but also inside), which “messages” are then converted into “information,” and then acted upon.

Two persons at the *same* location/time receive (in principle) the same “outside” messages, but will not necessarily *process* them in the same way. Conversely, individuals at *different*—but similar—locations/points in time will process messages differently—and for a variety of reasons. Members of a given *society* at a given point in time, however, will tend to exhibit similarities in their “information,” *despite* the fact that they receive different “messages”—and it is *this* fact that I home in on in this essay. Specifically, the question in which I am interested is: In a highly inequalitarian society such as ours, why is there, nonetheless, a high degree of similarity in individuals’ “information”?

In addressing that question, I am going to “cheat” in that I will use a *functional* approach (rather than the logico-deductive one). That is, the specific question that I wish to answer is: What *function* does this (unexpectedly) high degree of similarity (in “information” possessed) serve? And my answer is that (a) we all tend to *learn* to perceive Reality through the *same* (or virtually so) lens, which lens (b) serves the interests of the society’s elite. *Why* such a lens develops is a question beyond the scope of this essay; I *will* say, however, that the elite did not necessarily *choose* this lens—whether to serve its own interests or for some other (e.g., “higher”) purpose.

But whatever the “reason” for this lens being in place, the point that I wish to make here is that it will be of a *conservative* nature. What I mean in asserting that is that widespread acceptance of the “information” it provides tends (among other possibilities) to eventuate in perpetuation of the Existing Order. *How* does it so “act”? Likely it “works its wonders” in a variety of ways, but the particular way I would like to identify in this essay is through the *categories* associated with the lens—which, as we shall see, not only *present* information, but in doing so also—and simultaneously—*suppress* other information, information that may be unpleasant to recognize.

The categories commonly used often (perhaps even usually) are—ostensibly, at least—*non-normative* in nature; however—and this is ironic—in being *ostensibly* “objective” they are actually normative! They are so in a subtle—and interesting—way: They discourage one from making *value judgments*—or even thinking about the *possibility* of so doing. Thereby, only with difficulty can one develop a critique of the Existing Order; and doing so may require that one reject the “accepted” system of categorization in favor of one that one, oneself, creates—one having value judgments “built into” it. This may seem to reek of dishonesty—until one realizes that so-called objective systems of categorization are *inherently* normative *in being of a conservative—i.e., preservative—nature*. Thus, if one’s interest is in societal system change, it is essential that one recognize this matter, and then try to “work around” it in some manner.

Let me illustrate what I am referring to here, by taking an example from Economic Geography (my area of specialty when I was in university—decades ago). The economic geographer (back then, at least) identified four categories of economic activities: primary (e.g., agriculture), secondary (e.g., manufacturing), tertiary (wholesaling and retailing), and quaternary (services—personal and business). Note that the terms here might seem to suggest a hierarchy of importance—with “primary” activities being of most important; but the actual intent was to present a *historical sequence*—“primary” activities being the oldest, “quaternary” ones the most recent to appear on the scene.

Once this point is recognized, one may find it easy to accept the “truth” that these categories are of a non-normative, “objective” nature. But *are* they? The non-obvious point here is that these categories can be construed as suggesting, tacitly, that—so far as those *employed* in these activities are concerned—human well-being is distributed evenly through the economy; so that given that it is, then, a “constant” (to draw a concept from Statistics), it can be ignored as of no interest or relevance.

Such a tacit assertion is, though, patently false; so that if one regards *that* fact to be of importance, one may seek—or invent—a new terminology. Thus, my “hero,” Thorstein Veblen [1857 – 1929], used the categories “industrial” and “pecuniary” to express his *value judgments* regarding economic activities. Those terms may seem bland—“opaque,” Veblen might put it—and they are (Veblen’s *intention*?!); but the *meanings* that Veblen attached to these terms were most definitely *not* non-normative (e.g., in *The Theory of Business Enterprise*, 1904). For as he *describes* these activities, he makes clear that the former are of a *productive* nature, the latter of a

parasitic, and even *predatory*, nature. Thus, Veblen used terms associated with Ecology to describe—with highly negative implications—pecuniary (i.e., business) activities. It's true that Adam Smith [1723 – 1790] had expressed a similar viewpoint in, e.g., Chapter 1, Book II, Vol. I of *The Wealth of Nations* (1776); but Smith did not develop those concepts as much as Veblen did (at a later date), and did not make them as central to his “message” as did Veblen. Nor, of course, did Smith write with the biting irony/sarcasm that characterizes Veblen's writings.

Veblen gave some attention to “using” these two concepts in an attempt to bring about societal system change (e.g., *The Engineers and the Price System*, 1921), but never got seriously involved in any movement for societal system change. Some of his “followers” did, however.[1]

A question suggested by Veblen's body of work is: If one is to initiate a Movement having societal system change as its objective, is it necessary to create a new lens, and work for its widespread acceptance—or least acceptance on the part of those who might form the vanguard for such a Movement? I'm not sure what the answer is to that question, and in my writings on this web site have tacitly answered it in the negative. Perhaps I am wrong about this; if you think that I am wrong about this, and would like to express contrary views—ones more in line with those of Veblen—please write an essay(s) and send them to this web site! I would be most interested in reading such an essay(s).

In concluding this essay, I would like to make note of the fact that Everett Knight (*The Objective Society*, 1960, Introduction by William Barrett) asserted a half century ago that history should be studied with a *purpose* in mind, that purpose being not to become an erudite stuffed shirt, but to gain clues as to “*where* to go from here”—and *how*; and then to work for societal system change, to make the society more humane. What Knight didn't seem to recognize, however, is that the *system of thought* prevailing in a society is usually a real—if invisible—obstacle to *planned* “progressive” change; and that until one recognizes this, and determines how one will “work around” it, one may make little progress.

In our society, the notion of *planned* societal system change is not only not “in the air,” but regarded as subversive—“communistic,” in fact. An aspect of it not being in the former category is that if one is dissatisfied with one's situation, one may be encouraged to make an appointment with a psychiatrist. If one does so, one will likely learn that one must work to adjust to one's situation; if one were to bring up the possibility of working, rather, for societal system change, at the least one will be told, in a condescending manner, that such thinking is “utopian” (i.e., unrealistic), and one may run the risk of being declared insane. Even if one is able to resist the pressure—applied ever so subtly—to conform and adapt, one may be reluctant to pursue societal system change out of fear of being labeled a “subversive” (which one would be, of course!), and suffering possible negative consequences—such as getting oneself killed! (Which suggests that if one proceeds, one do so in a discreet manner, so as not to arouse suspicion from those who might do one—and the Movement—harm.[2])

Several decades ago R. Buckminster Fuller [1895 – 1983] wrote *Utopia or Oblivion: The Prospects for Humanity*, 1969), that title suggesting that if we don't move in a "utopian" direction, we are doomed to oblivion. Could it be that our leaders have a "death wish,"[3] and that's why they are not heeding Fuller? I tend to believe so, and therefore believe that if we prefer something other than oblivion, we begin working to convert our society into something better—which I would define as Movement in a Cooperative Eco-Communitarian (CECian) direction, as I argue in [What Are Churches For?](#) and various essays on this web site.

Notes

1. See, e.g., Daniel Bell, "Veblen and the New Class," *The American Scholar*, Vol. 32, no. 4 (August 1993), pp. 616 – 638. I used to subscribe to this journal, but this is the only issue that I kept!
2. A point that I would now add to my "[Another Set of 'More Reasons'](#)" essay is that if the churches were to take the lead in societal system change, the Movement would have a good chance for success simply because church-established CECs would be less likely to come under attack—either by government agents or ruffians—than CECs established by other groups.
3. Sigmund Freud [1856 – 1939] had argued that there is a "[death drive](#)." Could he have been right? My conviction is that *most* of us don't, but that our leaders Let's not get into that!

[September 17, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/responding-to-right-wingism/>]

Responding to Right-Wingism

Alton C. Thompson

If one works in the business world (as I do), and a supervisor or manager discovers that a problem has occurred within her/his group, the rational approach to use is not to seek someone to blame for the problem but, rather to (a) determine why the problem occurred, and then (b) make a judgment as to what changes to make to reduce the probability of such a problem from arising again. In making such a judgment, it might be decided that one or more employees should be terminated. But such an “answer” is too often made in a “knee jerk” fashion, so that rather than making a *procedural* change that would have been the best answer, the (foolish) termination course is taken instead—simply because it requires the least rigorous analysis, is “the easy way out.”

The above “answer” has applicability beyond the workplace, and it is that fact which I would like to address in this essay. The “problem” to which I have chosen to give attention is that of the recent growth of a rabid form of “right-wingism,” whose connection to a version of Christianity seemingly provides a rationale that will justify being inhumanly vicious—“unchristian,” by any standard that can reasonably termed “Christian.” This phenomenon has been commented upon brilliantly in “[Republicanism as Religion](#),” thus there is no need for me to repeat Andrew Sullivan’s comments here. Instead, I view this problem from the perspective of the “Wise Manager” approach mentioned above.

The “easy way out” in this case does not involve firing people, of course; rather, it involves criticizing such people for their “misinterpretations” of the Bible, their ignorance, their lack of intelligence, their bad manners, their violent speech and actions, etc. The problem with such a reaction, however, is that it is of the “knee jerk” variety that, therefore, doesn’t do anything to really *solve* the problem—in the sense of making it go away. From a *subjective* standpoint, one may gain some comfort in the “knowledge” that one is superior to these “humanoids,” and may acquire a release from the tensions that one feels by speaking out against these “morons.” But from an *objective* standpoint, what has one accomplished? Ironically, one may have simply made the problem worse!

And *that’s* the problem with a “knee-jerk” reaction. Those reacting this way have the intelligence—one would like to think—to react in a more rational way. The problem here, however, is that that more “rational” way might very well be outside the scope of their thinking, given that their thought processes—like those of most people—operate only within certain limits imposed by their society.

My perspective on why “right-wingism” has been rearing its ugly head in our society is a rather simple one: It is a “natural” response on the part of some in our society to a [cognitive dissonance](#) situation within which they find themselves (this concept being one introduced by Leon Festinger in 1956). In a sense, (a) certain individuals find themselves “between a rock [or Iraq, as I like to say!] and a hard place, (b) the situation forces one somehow to resolve the problem for one’s “peace of mind,” and (c) in this case the resolution results in one becoming a dogmatic, etc., right-winger.

What is the “situation” in question? It is that on the one hand one learns, in growing up in this society, that we are all equal, and opportunity exists for all. Many in our society, however, find themselves in a situation where they are not only “stuck,” but stuck on a lower rung of the “ladder of success.” There is, thus, a value—perhaps better termed a *myth*—on the one hand, and this comes in conflict with a *reality* that differs rather substantially from the myth. The tension thereby created must be “solved” by the individual experiencing it, and this resolution does not occur by a process of rational decision-making. Rather, the “decision” here is made by one’s subconscious. Given that fact, and given the existence of some vociferous right-wingers “out there” who seem to be expressing reasonably well one’s frustrations (insofar as one *can* articulate them), one is attracted to right-wing groups; and once one does so, one’s “convictions” become ever more intensified—and hardened.

Viewing this from a “Wise Manager’s” perspective, it becomes clear that the decisive factor causing this phenomenon is our *society*—the fact that it is inequalitarian, and becoming ever more so.

Having found the cause, the answer is virtually obvious: Work for societal system change in a more egalitarian direction, and the problem will gradually go away. Which solution I offer in my [What Are Churches For?](#) And the reason that this solution is given no attention in the press, etc., is that it is outside the scope of thinking of even the most intelligent in our midst. It is, however, *the* solution to this right-winger problem.

I will grant that I wrote the e-book referred to above with the problem of global warming in mind—and I continue to believe that that problem is the key one that we humans face today. It occurs to me, however, that if, in working for societal system change, a real effort is made to draw “lowers” into the Movement, this might enhance the chances that the Movement has to be successful. For if this right-wing phenomenon that is occurring at present is *not* addressed, ruffians associated with it—financed, and egged on by the likes of the Koch brothers—may work to *destroy* the Movement, thereby reducing the probability that our species will be “saved” from ecocatastrophe.

[September 18, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/a-sociological-perspective-on-the-cec/>]

A Sociological Perspective on the CEC

Alton C. Thompson

The Cooperative Eco-Community (CEC)—see Chapter 6 in my [What Are Churches For?](#)—should not be perceived in uni-dimensional terms. The *name* suggests two dimensions—i.e., it is cooperative, and has an ecological orientation—but in actuality many other dimensions are (or *should* be) involved as well:

- Economically, it strives for a high degree of self-sufficiency, and an economy as well-adapted possible to the onset, and intensification, of global warming.
- Ecologically, it strives for a location where it will be least affected by the ravages of global warming, and strives for “living lightly”—more basically, living in harmony with Mother Earth and her various creatures and features.
- Politically, it is self-governing. And as the Movement grows, it becomes ever more involved in local, state, and national, and even international politics/concerns.
- Legally, it has no laws, because it has no *need* for laws; a few rules, yes, but no laws: Its residents recognize that too often laws—such as the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act—legalize crimes, at times ones that are high destructive (see, e.g., Robert Scheer’s recent “[One Betrayal Too Many](#)”).
- Religiously, it has no orthodoxy, but values tolerance, love, and spirituality. (“Spirituality” is hard to define, but when I listen to Judy Collins sing, e.g., “Morning is Broken,” and tears come to my eyes, I know that I am having a spiritual experience.)
- Psychologically, it prizes human well-being—not only for its own members, but for its “neighbors,” defined as broadly as possible.
- Sociologically, it is a “family of families.”

I should have added as my last point “Etc.”—for I likely have missed one or more important dimensions.

In this essay I would like to make some comments on the CEC—the *ideal* CEC, I should add—using what might be broadly termed a *sociological* approach. Regarding that, the primary attribute that I would attribute to a CEC is that it is (again, ideally) a “family of families,” as I stated above. What that might mean in *concrete* terms is something that I will not comment on,

because I am committed to the principle that the planners of any given CEC have the *right* to “concretize” that principle, and also *should* so do. This might appear to be a “cop out” on my part, but is not that at all.

Following, then, are some (ideal) features of a CEC, as viewed from a broadly-defined sociological standpoint:

- In being a “family of families,” a CEC would provide its residents with security, this implying (among other things) that it would have no unemployment or poverty.
- The fact that a CEC would provide security to its residents also means that if a given marriage is “going bad,” it would be easy for the marriage to dissolve, without any penalty to either spouse. (What I mean by the latter point is that, e.g., with the break-up the wife would not be left without financial support, for as a community resident, her well-being would be assured by the community.)
- Related to this point, if a spouse becomes handicapped or dies, this will not present a hardship for the non-handicapped/living spouse—again, because s/he will find that community support is forthcoming automatically.
- Not only will a CEC be good for those married; it will not place pressure on a resident to *become* married. If one wishes to live as a “single,” this wish will be honored, and indeed regarded as “normal” as wishing to be married.
- If one is a homosexual, no stigma will be attached to that status; if homosexuals in the community wish to become married, such a wish will be honored—and regarded as “normal” as heterosexual marriage.
- If it’s true that “[it takes a village to raise a child](#),” residents of a CEC will know that their CEC *is* such a village—perhaps, indeed, the *best* sort of such village. Thus, children will be raised in the healthiest possible environment for their development as adults, with good physical and mental health, and sound values.
- Adults would learn, as a matter of course, as residents of the community, how to interact with others harmoniously; not only others who are similar to themselves, but others who are even rather different from themselves.
- Individuals would have an opportunity to develop their talents—for adults would be “tuned in” to recognizing latent talents in the young, and in recognizing them would do all they could to ensure that those latent talents are realized. Why? They would know that others, in developing their talents, would use them in the service of others, not for self-gratification. Why would they know this? Because children, in their development, would be taught that all have certain *rights*, but that also all have certain

duties/responsibilities—to themselves, but also to others. Therefore, they would find it “natural” to want to develop their talents, and then use them in the service of their fellows.

- Any CEC requires economic activities for the sustenance of its residents, and the leaders of a given CEC would make an effort to on the one hand determine how each member could best contribute to the economic welfare of the community, but also encourage residents to become as skilled in as many different activities that they would like to gain skills in.
- The same applies for skills—such as musical talent—of a non-economic nature. For community members, having few material needs, would not need to spend much time engaged in economic activities, and would be interested in using their free time for cultural pursuits, among other possibilities.
- Some occupations would be unnecessary in a CEC—for the simple reason that there would be no need for them. For example, there would be no police officers—for a lack of crime; no lawyers—given that disputes would be settled amicably; etc.

I do not wish to give the impression here that a CEC, once developed, would remain stagnant—for change is a virtual law of life. Not only would change occur in that individuals would be born, would age, and would eventually die; and in the sense that some would move out of the community, others would move in—and the absolute size (in terms of number of CEC residents) would vary over time. Beyond such changes, there would be changes in how residents of a given CEC related to residents of other CECs and to residents of the Larger Society (which, over time, would become ever smaller!). And changes would occur within any given CEC in terms of degree of economic self-sufficiency (becoming less so over time), in adaptational adjustment in response to global warming, in technological innovations occurring within the community or borrowed from elsewhere, in cultural developments, etc.

The future cannot be known with any degree of certainty—this principle applying ever more strongly the farther one looks into the future. How many humans will be alive in 2100 CE is unknown. What percent of the population—here and elsewhere—will be living in CECs in 2100 CE is also unknown (with the possibility that there will be none—because our species has become extinct!). Etc. There is no point, therefore, in trying to think too far ahead. The need, rather, is to proceed with this Project, hoping that it makes substantial progress—for if this does not occur, I fear for the future of our species.

[September 20, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/the-path-to-character-development/>]

The Path to Character Development

Alton C. Thompson

Yesterday's (September 18, 2011) *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (the "Sunday Journal" to us locals) had an article, in the "Crossroads" section, entitled "Character Development: Why the Virtues Matter." The author of the article was a past president of [Character Education Partnership](#), and is currently the chairman of a Milwaukee-area firm that is a "service/construction contractor."

The author began his article by referring to teenagers rioting in London, a mob attack recently at the Wisconsin State Fair, and the fact that teens "create havoc" at shopping malls. "Every day," he continued, "we are bombarded with stories that make us sick. . . Something is disappearing from our culture, causing all of us to feel unsettled about the future."

What is the "something" that is missing? For the author—and "many" others, he claimed—that "something" is character development. Given this, we must "insist on inserting the concept into the local, state, and national agendas." Although the author made no reference to William J. Bennett's *The Book of Virtues* (1993), it seems clear he has a philosophy similar to Bennett's. (You may recall that [Bennett](#) was Secretary of Education for 1985 to 1988.)

For the author, a person of character exhibits various virtues, these including: "justice, fortitude, self-control, love, a positive attitude, hard work, integrity, gratitude, humility, and wisdom." His answer for ensuring that those qualities emerge in the society: *education*.

Parenthetically, the author insists that "Character education is not a religious program. People of all religions and races [should] have character, because we share universal values."

After then using several paragraphs to discuss attempts in the Milwaukee area and elsewhere to "stop bullying, disrespect for teachers, cheating, low self-esteem and lack of initiative," he concludes: "Who could possibly be opposed to a community that values character development?"

Who, indeed! On the face of it, "character development" is a goal that all of us should support. The question, however, is how "pure" the motives of the author are—assuming that he is even fully aware of his motives! The question that arises here is: Granted that his orientation *ostensibly* is societal, but is his real motive a desire to make a fast buck?

I don't know the man, so I can only speculate as to what "moves" him. What strikes me about his article, however, is that it reflects an *individualistic* orientation rather than a *societal* one.

The article tacitly assumes that one's actions are solely a result of one's conscious decision-making, so that if one behaves "badly," this is because—and *only* because—one has *chosen* so to behave. Given this, an educational program can, he assumes, be designed to "educate" people regarding proper behavior, and if that program is implemented, it will be successful, he believes (ostensibly).

I will admit that I cannot simply reject such an argument out of hand—for I know that humans are not machines, and they *can* be educated to a degree. On the other hand, however, the author's program is suspect in that its implementation would involve financial gain for him and his firm—which fact makes one wonder if financial gain is his real interest and motive, even though he may not be conscious of that possibility.

What surprises me about this author's article is its failure to make reference to Richard G. Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, 2009. That book reports on a wealth of empirical research that demonstrates a strong correlation between the degree of inequality in a society and various health and social problems. Indeed, one commentator has stated: "Wilkinson's message is that social environment can be more toxic than any pollutant."

I don't recall the book making any specific reference to how inequality might affect "character," but many of the behaviors to which they make reference are ones that might be attributed *directly*, at least, to "bad" character.

But if a behavior such as bullying can be *directly* attributed to a lack of character, must we stop our analysis there? The author evidently would, because he is convinced that behavior is solely a function of conscious decision-making. But the discipline of Sociology has as a basic premise—one with substantial empirical support—that much human behavior represents an unconscious reaction to one's *environment*. Once one concedes this point, it becomes possible to at least hypothesize that "bad character" should be more evident in unequal societies than in societies that are more equal.

Now if one believes—as I do—that such a relationship exists, it follows that if one has an interest in reducing such behavior, one will work for societal system change. In doing so, however, one—if one has any degree of wisdom—will realize that such change cannot be accomplished through political means, but only through actions by individuals, acting either as individuals or as members of groups. And will then proceed to do what one can to bring about (peaceful) such change.

What *form* should societal system change take? Movement in the direction of a society of cooperative eco-communities (CECs), I would argue, doing so in, e.g., my [What Are Churches For?](#) and various essays on this web site. If someone else has a better idea, I would like to learn about it.

[September 21, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/peering-into-the-future/>]

Peering Into The Future

Alton C. Thompson

“Non-planted” species such as ours are equipped with senses to receive messages, a [nervous system](#) to transmit them, a brain to process them, and a nervous system to transmit the resulting “information” to various parts of the body, if such transmission is appropriate. Thus, when I got off the bus this morning to walk to my place of employment, the components of my body were busy receiving, transmitting, processing, and further transmitting so that I would reach my destination safely; and most of this activity was occurring without any conscious thought on my part.

I *was*, however, engaged in conscious thought while walking to work, and those thoughts can be phrased as three general questions:

- What *will* happen (this morning, tomorrow, next week, next month, next year, etc.)?
- What *should* happen (at different points in time, during different periods of time)?
- What *should I do* (at different points in time, during different periods of time)?
- What *will I do* (at different points in time, during different periods of time)?

As I was walking to work, likely my mind was skipping around from one question to another, and from one point in time (or time duration) to another. But even much of this “cogitation” was occurring at a semi-conscious level—so that even now, less than an hour after that walk, I have little recollection of what was going through my mind. I know that I was thinking about this essay, but likely was thinking about all sorts of other things as well.

Much of the thinking that we engage in as humans pertains to coping in the here-and-now, and is thinking that we *must* engage in for our very survival. What we find much more difficult to comprehend, however, is that our survival doesn’t *just* depend on making short-run decisions. Perhaps our minds are so occupied with living in the short-run—the “now”—that we simply don’t have *time* to think beyond “now.” Or, perhaps our “comfort zone” is the immediate present, and we are *uncomfortable* about thinking beyond a few hours in to the future. But whatever the reason(s) for our obsession with the short-term, the fact of the matter is that—as a *species*, at least—we have the *capability* of thinking beyond tomorrow, and at present have a *need* so to do.

This “need” can be interpreted, legitimately, in a variety of ways, but my view is that there is an especial need to recognize, at present, the threat posed by global warming; for some respected scientists believe that a “tipping point” has been passed, so far as global warming is concerned. What *that* possibility (probability?) implies is that (a) efforts at mitigation will not “turn the tide”—i.e., prevent global warming from occurring apace, and (b) a result of importance for humans, of this possibility, is that our species will be reduced drastically by, e.g., 2100 CE—perhaps, even, to the point of extinction.

The question prompted by these possibilities is: How should we humans *respond* to the phenomenon of global warming? Especially given that we cannot (it would seem) *prevent* it from occurring, because the *negative* feedback mechanisms which have resisted change have become so “stressed” that they have become *positive* feedback mechanisms, thereby *enabling* further change.

If efforts at mitigation (typically involving the application of various technologies) are bound to prove futile, this leaves us with two possible responses: (a) resignation or (b) adaptation. And the likelihood is that of those who take global warming seriously, some will take the first path, others will take the second. Ironically, however, we can identify the following four categories of people (assuming that at least *some* humans are alive in 2100 CE):

- A. Those who take global warming seriously, and pursue an adaptation strategy.
 - 1. Those whose descendants are alive in 2100 CE.
 - 2. Those whose descendants are *not* live in 2100 CE.
- B. Those who are either oblivious of the threat, or are resigned to it.
 - 1. Those whose descendants are alive in 2100 CE.
 - 2. Those whose descendants are *not* live in 2100 CE.

That is, if one takes global warming seriously, and attempts to adapt, this will *not* guarantee that one’s descendants will be alive in 2100 CE. On the other hand, if one is oblivious of the threat or is aware of it, but simply resigns oneself to it, it does not follow that one’s descendants will *not* survive. The reason for this is that a high degree of unpredictability is associated with global warming—both in terms of how a given area is affected, and what the conditions will be one year relative to the next. As a consequence of these imponderables, if any humans are alive in 2100 CE, some are likely to be in the A.1. category, some the B.1. category.

Now in 2011 we cannot know *if* any humans will be alive in 2100 CE; and if there are, if there will be more in the A.1. category, or more in the B.1. category. However, the *rational* person today will assume that the wisest course is to (a) take global warming seriously and (b) develop,

and implement, an adaptive strategy (one that also involves mitigation efforts, even though those efforts will not prevent further global warming).

What sort of adaptive strategy should one adopt? Essentially, there are two possibilities:

- Learn to become a gatherer-hunter (by, e.g., reading Peter Goodchild's *Survival Skills of the North American Indians*), and at some point leave the comfort of one's home (with one's family, if one has one), go into the wilderness, and start living a very different way of life. (Goodchild has written a number of excellent essays for this web site, but has recently declared that he is [leaving the internet](#).) (:
- Plan, with others, a community for one's group, choosing a location least likely to be affected by global warming, read the Peter Goodchild book referred to above so that one will be able to engage in some gathering-hunting for survival, but plan for a variety of economic (including some agriculture, greenhouse farming, a fish pond, etc.) and other activities—and then acquire land for one's community, create it, and then move into it.

Given that we humans emerged in a social context—contrary to what theorists of the past, such as Thomas Hobbes, may have argued[1]—the first option likely will not appeal to many. Besides, even if these individuals/families were to be in existence in 2100 CE, they likely would have lost virtually all of what civilization has to offer.

The second option is the more likely to occur, and would allow the retention of the best features of civilization, while sloughing off its worst features. It's no wonder why I argue the case for that option in my [What Are Churches For?!](#)

Note

1. When individuals such as Thomas Hobbes [1588 – 1679] and John Locke [1632 – 1704] wrote about early humans, their intent was not so much to be serious anthropologists as to provide intellectual support to their political/societal ideas—ideas that they wanted implemented in the *present*.

[September 22, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/cecs-the-working-class/>]

CECs and the “Working Class”

Alton C. Thompson

Paul Mattick has argued (in his [*Economic Crisis and Crisis Theory*](#), 1974) that in the development of the discipline of Economics, “it was thought desirable to found the authority of economics on the procedures of natural science. This . . . desire prompted a search for general economic laws independent of time and circumstances. If such laws could be proven[,] the existing society would thereby be legitimated and every idea of changing it refuted.”

What this statement suggests is that from the perspective of Economics (with its concept of an equilibrium), certain “natural” laws operate in the economic realm, the “work” of those laws moving a society’s economy toward an ideal situation. But doing so only if no “interference” occurs to prevent those “laws” from working their magic. From whence can “interference” come? From government, and *only* from government, hence the command, [*laissez-faire*](#) (i.e., literally “let do,” but actually meaning “let it alone”).

Should, however, this assertion that government can only “mess things up” be accepted as having a scientific basis? There’s a considerable literature critiquing the pretensions of Economics—the writings of John Kenneth Galbraith [1908 – 2006] being perhaps most well-known—with Steve Keen’s *Debunking Economics—Revised and Expanded Edition: The Naked Emperor Dethroned?* (2011) being one of the most recent such works.

I will make no effort here to detail the arguments presented by these various critics, and will simply note that critics have argued that:

- The discipline of Economics is based on certain assumptions simply taken as “given,” and thereby beyond discussion—such as:
 - Existing ownership—of, e.g., real property—has a legitimate basis (so that, e.g., we didn’t *really* steal land from the Native Americans!).
 - No class system exists—all are equal, in abilities, interests, motivations, wealth, etc.
 - Time and space are both illusions. “Events” occur simultaneously, and at a single point in space (!).

These various “background” assumptions are all lacking in realism, of course, with some of them being ridiculously unrealistic—indeed, impossible.

- Explicit assumptions—e.g., that all “actors” in the economy are rational decision-makers who can project accurately into the future—lack in realism. For example, they assume *uniformity* where in actuality there is *diversity*, that diversity often describable with a “normal” curve (i.e., the “bell” curve).
- The conclusions that purportedly follow from a given Economics theory fail to match what can be observed empirically—often deviating “radically,” indeed, from what can be observed in the real world.
- In many cases the conclusions that *purportedly* follow, logically, from a given set of assumptions do not in fact—because the assumptions themselves are self-contradictory.

Likely there are various other fundamental problems that could be identified with Economics, but not being an economist (thank God!) I will not try to go beyond the ones listed above. (Before proceeding, however, let me note that the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, first, is not a true Nobel prize—i.e., one established by [Albert Nobel](#) [1833 – 1896]; and, second, that the “Economic Sciences” part of the title makes the false claim that Economics warrants the label “science.”)

These various problems with Economics raise, of course, the question: Given that Economics is by no means a science, why is its existence tolerated? Simply as a means to provide employment to individuals adapted to living in a fantasy world, or is there some better explanation?

The answer that critics have provided to this question is that the fact that Economics *appears* to be (to many, at any rate) a science is a *useful* quality, for that appearance enables it then slyly to function as an [ideology](#). An “ideology” can be defined as a set of ideas/concepts/facts and alleged facts that encourage behaviors, those behaviors serving the *interests* of a certain group. *What* group, in the case of Economics? The *wealthy* in a society—both individuals and organizations (business corporations in particular).

This is not to say that *only* the ideology of Economics serves their interests—for, e.g., militarism also plays a huge role in serving the (short-term) interests of the elite. And members of the non-elite—in being convinced that in serving in the military they are “fighting for our freedoms”—gladly “fall” for this spurious argument, and serve proudly in the military.

But despite the fact that Economics is not the *sole* weapon in the elite’s arsenal, it *is* a major one, and one whose ideological role is easy to hide from the public given its esoteric nature. Given

this latter point, I see no point in trying to convince my fellows regarding the evils of Economics—and proving to them (contrary to the teachings of that discipline) that we do not live in the “[best of all possible worlds](#).” Surely they have the common sense to realize that this is *not* the case—those who are unemployed in particular realizing this truism. I *do* wish to tell such people, however, that in the existing society the “cards are stacked against them,” so that they are fools if they look to politics for “salvation.”

Those who realize that the Republican and Democratic parties are little more than Tweedledum and Tweedledee may believe that the answer lies in creating a new political party—such as the Green Party. Such people need, however, to “get real” and come to the realization that they are currently seeing through a certain lens, and need to “see through” it. Once they have done so, they will realize that they need to “think outside the box”—which thinking may lead them realize that the answer to their woes lies with societal system change. Some may even come to realize that not only could *their* problems be solved by this means, but *society’s* as well—including the threat of global warming.

I will grant that it is hard to “concretize” *societal system change*. If, however, one thinks of the New Society as some sort of federation of small cooperative eco-communities (CECs), the New Society can be more readily conceived, because a given CEC can be fairly easily *visualized*.

In writing my [What Are Churches For?](#) I attempted not only to provide a rationale for the CEC, but to make convincing arguments regarding *how* societal system change could be accomplished. Although I did not specifically address “working class” people in that e-book, I would like to think that those working for societal system change would be able to develop arguments for the CEC that would be both *understandable* by such individuals, and such as to *motivate* them to want to become a part of the emerging New Society. May it be so!

[September 23, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/give-me-a-cig/>]

Give Me a CIG!

Alton C. Thompson

In discussing, in Chapter 8 of my e-book, [*What Are Churches For?*](#), the Structured Interaction Group (SIG), I speculated on possible consequences—all of them positive—of SIG participation. I could not, however, in that chapter present any evidence in support of those speculations. Now, however, I feel more confident in those speculations, as a consequence of my experience this past Sunday (September 18, 2011).

The Presbyterian church that I attend has an adult class, but I had never attended it until last Sunday—in part, because I learned of its existence only recently, in part because I didn't think that attendance would be worthwhile. However, taking a cue from the bumper sticker that reads “Improve Your Image—Be Seen With a Norwegian!,” I decided that my attendance might improve the group. (I say this “tongue in cheek,” of course . . . mainly.) And so I attended the class for the first time on Sunday.

The teacher began by passing out—a sheet of paper, that is—that contained statements by four different scholars on the vineyard parable presented in Matthew 20 (a parable that has a vineyard owner hire workers during the course of a day, and pay them all the same wage at the end of the day, despite the fact that they had worked different lengths of time). The fact that four statements were presented, each with a different perspective, suggested to me that we should assume that the parable has no “objective” meaning, and that we were invited to discuss the parable with the purpose of stimulating our thinking regarding the parable's meaning.

The class got off to a slow start. Fortunately, however, as the teacher didn't have much to offer regarding the parables, he asked for input. At first, nothing much was said, so I tried to “break the ice” by saying that if I were one of workers, I would refuse to work for the vineyard owner because he ran a non-union shop. It worked, for the people in attendance started to open up, and I found the resulting discussion interesting.

In fact, I couldn't stop thinking about the parable during the service that followed, and in the process developed a unique (I believe) “take” on the parable. In brief, what came to my mind was that there was a parallel between this parable and the story, in Matthew 4, of Jesus's temptation: Just as Jesus was said to have been tempted by Satan, so did Jesus tempt his disciples in telling this parable.

What led me to this perception of the parable were two facts:

- Jesus and his disciples, in having been raised in Judaism, would have been exposed to the principle that their duty in life was to attend to the needs of others, a principle that Jesus made central to his “ministry.” (See Chapter 1 in my e-book.) I should add that although it’s true that the religious leaders of Jesus’s time had strayed from the heart of Judaism (a fact suggested by the famous Good Samaritan parable of Luke 10), Jesus was trying to bring his disciples—and other of his fellow Jews—back to authentic Judaism.[1]
- Parables, by their very nature (i.e., in lacking an objective meaning), invite discussion with others, in an effort to “flesh out” the meaning of the parable, the meaning that emerges being some sort of amalgamation of the individual interpretations expressed.

Given these principles, it occurred to me that Jesus used this parable to “test”—or tempt—his disciples, and others who might have been listening. Why think of the parable in this way?

I believe that Jesus’s expectation in telling this parable is that those hearing it would identify with the workers, and be upset at their treatment by the vineyard owner—the fact that they had been paid unfairly. Thus, as the disciples proceeded to discuss the parable “among themselves,” this point was immediately brought out, with anger being expressed toward the (hypothetical) vineyard owner.

At some point, however, and probably fairly quickly, one of the disciples (Thomas, perhaps?) “saw the light,” and proceeded to present his “theory” to the others (but not in English, of course):

“I think I see what Jesus was trying to do with this parable. He knew that our immediate reaction would be to perceive the injustice that had occurred, thereby identifying with the workers. But our upbringing in Judaism, along with our time with the Master, has taught us that our orientation should not be to our *own* needs, but to those of *others*. In effect, Jesus tempted us to abandon what he had taught us—and we all did, as indicated by our immediate identification with the workers. We should, of course, have immediately identified with the owner, because the whole thrust of his teaching has been that we must try to emulate the owner—in his generosity.

“Jesus told us this parable to reinforce his teaching. He knew that although we would at first identify with the workers, we would—through our process of discussion—quickly come to realize that we were identifying with the wrong person. Given that the beauty of parables is that they are easy to remember, when, in the future, we are in a situation where we are tempted to forget what Jesus has taught us, we will remember this parable, and therefore be able to resist that temptation.”

The other disciples, in hearing this explanation, all began to nod in agreement, became excited at the fact that they had come to perceive the deeper meaning behind the parable’s “obvious”

meaning, which state of mind itself helped them live by the Master's teachings in the future. (The writer of this gospel, however, was too convention-minded to understand this point.)

The adult class that I attended was not a SIG, merely a class with some discussion, but what I learned from the class is that discussions can be creative, and thereby exciting, if those involved in the discussion do not have solidified views and are open to the views of others. I would add, however, as a hypothesis that if discussions are structured in the manner suggested in Chapter 8 of my e-book, their potential positive effects will be even intensified. Whether that is the case remains to be seen, of course.

Several months ago I sent a lengthy paper to the pastor of my church, proposing the SIG idea, and her response was that the decision was not up to her but, rather, to the local governing body (called the "Session"). To date, I have heard no "official" word about my proposal, but that doesn't bother me because I realize now that I had not laid the proper groundwork. My hope is that by continuing to attend this class, a point will be reached where I can make this proposal to the others in the group, and that with the entire group behind the proposal, the Session will consent to it.

The point that I would emphasize above all regarding discussions is that they have the potential of making participants excited, even giving them a "high" (which for some may be interpreted as "Spirit-filling"). The enthusiasm which discussions can generate not only makes one feel good, but leads to the development of solidarity within the group, leads to the generation of creative ideas—and who knows what else, all of a positive nature. The only point that I would add here is my firm belief—so far unsubstantiated—that the SIG is especially promising in its potentially positive effects for those who are participating in it.

Note

1. If the religious leaders of Jesus's time had distorted Judaism by emphasizing ritual over right behavior relative to others (the "neighbor," defined broadly), so has Christianity distorted Jesus's "ministry" by continuing the emphasis on ritual (with some denominations) and emphasizing *orthodoxy* over *orthopraxy* (with most denominations—the Quakers being a major exception). Last Sunday we were to read together the "Apostles' Creed," but I did not participate in that ritual—for the simple reason that that creed borders on blasphemy.

[September 24, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/the-baylor-religion-survey/>]

The Baylor Religion Survey

Alton C. Thompson

The recently-published “[Baylor Religion Survey](#),” [1] a product of the Department of Sociology and the Hankamer School of Business (!) of Baylor University,[2] presents the results of a survey of 1,714 adults, chosen at random from “across the country” (i.e., the United States). (The questions constituting the questionnaire are listed in Appendix B of the document—14 pages of questions.)

The report itself consists of an Introduction, followed by 14 (unnumbered) chapters, and concludes with a “Methodology Report.” The chapter titles include (alternately) “How God Sustains The American Dream,” “Mental Health And Spirituality,” “God’s Worriers: Religion, Anxiety And Melancholy,” “The Religious Significance Of Work,” “The Social And Religious Characteristics Of Contemporary American Entrepreneurs,” and “Attitudes Toward Homosexuality in The United States.” Some of these chapters obviously reflect the fact that a business school was involved in the survey, not just a Sociology department.

To relay here just a few of the study’s findings:

- 73.1 % of those surveyed stated that they believed—either “agree” or “strongly agree”—that God has a plan for them.

Regarding the two categories “strong agreeers” and “strong disagreeers” on this matter:

- Of those in the sample who “earned” \$100,000 or more annually, 29.8% were “strong disagreeers,” 17.2% were “strong agreeers.”
- Of those in the sample with college degrees or more, 42.6% were “strong disagreeers,” 32.8% were “strong agreeers.”
- 52.6% of the “strong agreeers” believe that government does too much, but only 21.1% of the “disagreeers” believe this.
- 43.9% of the “strong agreeers” believe that able-bodied people who are out of work shouldn’t receive unemployment checks, but “only” 24.3% of the “strong disagreeers” accept this view.

- 53.7% of the “strong agreeers” believe that anything is possible for those who work hard, and 21.5% of the “strong disagreeers” do.
- Etc.

The above results might suggest that all 75 questions in the questionnaire asked the individual to express a *degree* of agreement, but in actuality many of the questions simply asked the person being surveyed to choose one item from a list. Thus, not all of the answers requested were of a “quantitative” nature (using, in effect, a 5-point [Likert](#) scale).

How much “stock” should be put in this study? True, the research itself was conducted by a reputable organization, the Gallup people, but the *design* of the questionnaire came from Baylor personnel. Given this latter fact, one would expect that the questionnaire reflected the fact that Baylor is a [Baptist](#) University—and that expectation is realized. First, as one reads through the questions (in Appendix B), it becomes obvious that the creators’ concept of “religion” has its basis in their exposure to Christianity. Second, those questions—and question 12 in particular—indicate that their selection of questions reflects the “Baptist brand.” Why do I say that?

In question 12 one is asked to describe one’s “religious identity,” doing so by choosing one of four “quantitative” categories (from “very well” to “not at all”) for each of the following:

- Bible-believing
- Born-again
- Charismatic
- New Age
- Evangelical
- Fundamentalist
- Mainline Christian
- Pentecostal
- Seeker
- Spiritual
- Theologically conservative
- Theologically liberal
- Traditional

Were other scholars doing this same study, it’s unlikely that they would have used this same list. Indeed, if 6 different groups of scholars were to do this study, it’s highly probable that each list would be unique, with, however, *some* degree of overlap. My point here, of course, is that the concept of “objectivity” also applies to *what* one chooses to study, and the “lens” one uses in describing the possibilities “out there”—in this case, *religious* possibilities. (In a sense, I am referring to the “GIGO” principle here—“garbage in, garbage out.”) So that the fact that the study was done by personnel at a *Baptist* university has affected the *nature* of the study.

Not only is the authors' concept of "religion" colored by their exposure to Christianity; interestingly, it is a concept of "religion" that has but a tenuous relationship to the "ministry" of Jesus!! One can argue that the reason Jesus initiated a "ministry" is that in his comparison of Hebrew Scripture with what the religious leaders of his time were promulgating, he observed a clear "disconnect"—and therefore decided to do what he could to correct that problem. Ironically, were Jesus to "[come to Chicago](#)" today, he would observe a number of organizations claiming to be Christian (rather than "Jesuan"!), and would find that his teachings were being promulgated half-heartedly, if at all.

Why do I say that? As I point out in Chapter 1 of my e-book [What Are Churches For?](#), the "heart" of the (Christian) Bible is the matter of how one should relate to one's fellow human beings. For example:

- In Matthew 25 one is enjoined to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, receive strangers, clothe the naked, take care of the sick, and visit those in prison—without any qualifications being stated.
- In Luke 10 the "neighbor" is defined as one who needs help, with the implication that to be "religious" is to emulate the Good Samaritan.
- In Chapter 1 of the Letter From James (which may have been written by Jesus's brother), "pure and genuine" religion is said to consist of taking care of orphans and widow in their suffering (and also keeping oneself from being corrupted by the world).

This point that I have placed in parentheses above is of interest, because a fair comment to make about Christianity, as it exists in the United States, is that it's just another business! After all, the United States does not have a state church, supported by taxes. Rather, any given church needs to develop a "market" for its "product," and in doing so needs to develop a brand of religion designed for a certain "niche." To survive, it needs money coming in, and is in a situation where it needs to develop a set of congregants willing to "shell out" the needed cash. (A geographer friend of mine used to refer to the geographical distribution of a given church's congregants as the church's "salvation shed"!)

Given the situation that churches find themselves in here in the United States,[3] is it any surprise that the churches *reflect* the society and play little, if any role, in *improving* the society, or acting as agents for *societal system change*?! I knew this when I wrote Chapter 9 of *What Are Churches For?*, but being an "eternal optimist," I gave the churches a role in the process of societal system change anyway! I guess that I'm ignorant enough to believe that when Jesus was referring to the "Kingdom of God" he was referring to God's *kingship*: God has given us certain rules for living (such as the ones I referred to above), and our role as loyal subjects is to *obey* those rules (and *I* do not add an "or else" to this sentence—alluding to the possibility of spending eternity, after one's death, in a very warm place).

Unfortunately, early on some of the (alleged) followers of Jesus—ones living away from Palestine—began to graft pagan Mystery ideas onto their belief system, so that—as someone has put it—the religion *of* Jesus became a religion (and later a series of *denominations*) *about* Jesus.

Given this, we should not be surprised to learn (Cathy Lynn Grossman, “[Many Americans see God’s hand in economy](#)”), from the Baylor Religion Survey, that “About one in five Americans combine a view of God as actively engaged in daily workings of the world with an economic conservative view that opposes government regulation and champions the [allegedly] free market as a matter of faith.”

“‘They say [that] the invisible hand of the [allegedly] free market is really God at work,’ said sociologist Paul Froese, co-author of the Baylor Religion Survey, released Tuesday’

“‘They think the economy works because God wants it to work. It’s a new religious economic idealism [?!],’ with politicians ‘invoking God while chanting “less government.”’”

The conclusions that *I* draw from the Baylor Religion Survey are twofold:

- Most Americans are terribly ignorant of the nature of Economics as a discipline. They don’t realize that the models that economists create are not “first approximations” in an attempt to understand reality (i.e., the sort of model introduced by [Johann Heinrich von Thünen](#)); rather, they are of a *normative* nature—in that they state what “should” be, but without any substantial basis for one’s *accepting* them as such. Certainly the “norms” that economists assert have nothing in common with the values evident in Jesus’s “ministry”!
- Although Christianity *claims* to have a basis in the life of Jesus, it lacks the *orthopraxy* orientation of Jesus and, instead, is fixated on “correct” beliefs (i.e., *orthodoxy*) and (to a degree) rituals.

With so many in this country being abysmally ignorant/misinformationed and intolerant, it is difficult to be optimistic about the Movement’s future (referring to the Movement discussed in my e-book)—but I remain so nonetheless. As has been said, “With God all things are possible!”

Notes

1. The full name: *The Values and Beliefs of the American Public, Wave III Baylor Religion Survey*, September, 2001.
2. Baylor, located in Waco, Texas, is affiliated with a Baptist denomination. It was chartered in 1845, and is the oldest continually-operating university in Texas.
3. I am not, however, suggesting here that having a *state* church would be a better option.

[September 27, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/i-too-am-khan/>]

I, Too, Am Khan

Alton C. Thompson

A movie, to be great, should:

- Be *multi-layered*, multi-dimensional—so that different people viewing it will interpret it differently, and the same person viewing it at different points in time will derive ever more—and deeper—meanings from it.
- Engage the viewer *emotionally*, eliciting in the viewer a variety of emotions—such as delight, shame, concern, compassion, anger, etc.
- Provoke *thought* on the part of the viewer.
- Even include the *improbable*, the *perplexing*—i.e., have “fairy tale” elements, and more.

Last night (September 23, 2011) my younger daughter and I went out for “Chinese” (food, that is), then went home and watched a DVD that I had just borrowed from the local library (but have since ordered through Amazon). (In case you’re wondering: My wife is currently in Boston with our older daughter—who gave birth, on September 8, to Karina Cho—because our daughter has been experiencing some problems related to that birth.) The movie that we watched was [*My Name is Khan*](#), directed by Karan Johar, and starring Shah Rukh Khan (as Rizwan Khan) and Kajol Mukherjee (as Mandira Khan).

This is a truly professional film, with excellent acting, technical excellence, and most of the attributes of a great movie:

- It is multi-dimensional, thereby inviting a variety of interpretations—for some viewers will pay attention to certain of its elements, other viewers to others. (Unfortunately, the captioning used means that one must pay attention, “simultaneously” somehow, to the words on the screen *and* the actions occurring—which fact reduces the film’s total impact.)
- At times I was smiling, or even laughing, at other times I felt deep shame and anger (regarding how Muslims were being treated in this country—especially after “9/11”), at times the pathos brought tears to my eyes, etc.
- It caused me to think—which is what I have chosen to focus on in this essay.

- At times I was perplexed: Why did Mandira Khan choose to marry Rizwan, given that she is beautiful, intelligent, and charming in the movie, and he has Asperger Syndrome? Was it because she had had an “arranged” marriage in India, had had problems with her husband, who then abandoned her and their son, leaving San Francisco (where they were then living) for Australia, and was desperate to find a new father for her son? But why would she be desperate, given her good looks? Etc.

And regarding Rizwan: His moral thinking had been “fixed” while he was a child, with certain principles being “drilled” into him by his mother—such as “there are only good and bad people in the world, differences in religion, skin color, etc., are not even of secondary importance.” Are we to take this “fixedness” as our model? Shouldn’t, rather, we strive to “grow” emotionally, intellectually (including in our moral thinking), and in our actions?

Another thing that was initially perplexing to me about the movie was why a man with Asperger Syndrome was made its star. [Asperger Syndrome](#), by the way, basically is a disorder that makes those with it have difficulties in social interaction, and have behavior that is often characterized by repetitive patterns, and thought processes that are often highly restricted. In Rizwan’s case his primary characteristics seemed (to me) to be that:

- His thinking was “deficient” in that he seemed only to perceive others in terms of the categories “good” and “bad”—his thinking was *dichotomized*, no other “variables” entered his thinking, so far as other people were concerned.
- He was able to “read” others only insofar as to be able to categorize them as either “good” or “bad;” he was unable to “read others’ minds.” As a consequence of the latter fact, once he had become convinced (by words spoken by Mandira) that he should tell the President of the United States that he was not a terrorist, he was relentless in pursuing that goal: his single-mindedness was both admirable and disturbing—and I suspect that the director wanted us *especially* to be disturbed by this fact.

As to how I perceive Rizwan (today!), what first comes to my mind is [Voltaire](#)’s [1694 – 1778] *L’Ingénu*, a story of a Native American (Huron) who visits Paris, and because of his lack of familiarity with “civilization,” this “deficiency” enables Voltaire to point out civilization’s idiocies. But I am also reminded of Isaiah 11:6, in which reference is made to a wolf, lamb, leopard, goat, calf, lion, and yearling all living together in harmony, with a little child leading them. I see that “little child” in Rizwan—a person who because of the apparent simple-minded nature of his thinking, enables *us* to see anew. And *that’s* why, I believe, the principal character in this movie was a person with a mental disorder. What genius!

I'm sure that others will interpret the movie differently than I have, but my purpose in writing this essay is to convey the meaning that *I* perceive in it—today, at any rate. And the message that I take away from this movie is that there is but *one* true religion, and that religion is the religion of *love*. Given that “fact,” the point is *not*, however, to abandon existing religions; rather, it is for each of us to examine our religion, and then begin the process of expunging from it all that is inconsistent with that principle. (So that, e.g., if beliefs and/or rituals fail to support that principle, they should either be modified or abandoned altogether.)

I was raised in Christianity, and despite the fact that I am highly critical of that religion, I have no intention to abandon it. As Chapter 1 of my [*What Are Churches For?*](#) e-book indicates, I have grown to interpret the Christian Bible solely from a *orthopraxy* standpoint—i.e., in terms of the love principle—and I see that “revisioning” as a basis for developing a new sort of Christianity. I invite others so raised to arrive at their *own* such interpretations, with the possibility of our eventually combining all of those interpretations into a New Christianity. And I would encourage members of other religions to follow the same path.

We are all children of God (or whatever name you choose to use for Deity), and we should *act* as if we are all members of the same family. In families there are always quarrels, of course, but the love bonds that connect members of a *true* family cannot be broken—so that quarrels never result in fighting or killing, but always tend toward reconciliation. Indeed, not only are quarrels to be *expected*; they can be *agents of growth*—in one's thinking and in one's feelings toward others. But there must be commitment to the love principle for this to occur. Let it be so!

About a century ago there was a “social gospel” movement in the United States—called that by those who refused—or were incapable—of recognizing that the “gospel” is, by *its very nature* social. That movement failed—the reason (I would suggest) being that its leaders failed to realize that religious change is intertwined with social change: Societies are *systems*, and the religion(s) of a society is an integral part of the entire system—“working” to support that system, keep it “operating.” Thus, unless one works for societal *system* change—change of the sort compatible with the religious change one desires—one's efforts will be in vain. And they *were*, a century ago.

The lesson that we can learn from this failure is that if religious change is to occur today, there must be societal system change of a sort *consistent* with, and *supportive* of, that change. How can such societal system change be accomplished? An answer (but not the *sole* one) to this question is provided in my e-book—that the churches can *potentially* play a decisive role in bringing about desirable societal system change. Indeed, my ultimate purpose in writing that book was to give church members and denominations “raw materials” for their use in working toward that end. Whether they do or not remains to be seen, of course.

I realize that my interpretation of the *Khan* movie here has been “brief and to the point.” But I see my role as merely “showing others the way,” not giving them a detailed “map” to enable them to get where they need to go. I don’t have all of the answers, nor does anyone else—and *both* of those facts are “good.” For once we realize their truth, they make us realize that we are somewhat like the men in the story of the blind men and the elephant: We each possess *some* of the truth, and if we interact one with another, stating our individual “truths” honestly one to another, and listen to others with an open mind, we may eventually arrive at something that resembles Truth.

[September 28, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/culture-in-the-new-society/>]

Culture in the New Society

Alton C. Thompson

Last night (September 24, 2011) I attended an all-[Beethoven](#) concert of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Edo de Waart. During the concert I (a) noticed that de Waart's conducting seemed to be rarely in sync with the orchestra's playing—leading me to believe that conductors are useless parasites (!); (b) thought that the tempo of the first movement of *Symphony No. 5* was too rushed; and (c) concluded that *No. 5* is not as great a symphony as is generally thought: It's not well-conceived, in that at several points it leads up to an apparent finale, but then fails to “deliver;” and there is so much “forte” playing by the orchestra that it ends up sounding more like a bunch of noise than of music.

(I don't mean to be suggesting here that the Milwaukee Symphony is a lousy one—for it's a fine one; but not only was I not satisfied with the playing of the first movement of *No. 5*, I fail to understand why Beethoven's utterly boring/obnoxious *Grosse Fuge* in B-flat major was included on the program. Put another way, the concert had *warts*—no pun intended, of course, I wouldn't think of stooping that low!)

I surprised myself in reaching the above conclusions, for although I rarely listen to the few Beethoven CDs in my possession (preferring, rather, the music of Jean Sibelius, Carl Nielsen, and Edvard Grieg—Scandinavians all), I have respect for Beethoven (and love his *Symphony No. 7*). But this was the first time that I had heard *No. 5* “live,” and that experience had, as a result, a different perception of old “Ludwig van” on my part.

Not only did my attendance at that concert affect my perception of Beethoven. It motivated me to think about the nature of culture in the future New (CECian society)—i.e., the society of cooperative eco-communities discussed in my e-book [What Are Churches For?](#) The question that this attendance caused me to ask was: As the New Society comes into existence, will *existing* cultural elements (musical, literary, etc.) be “carried over” or, rather will a new culture develop?

Despite the fact that I had minored in English as an undergraduate, and in my younger years was “into” literature (the classic novels, in particular), I lost that interest decades ago. However, my interest in music developed long ago (I played French horn in the high school band and in the college orchestra, I played my trumpet in a “[4-H](#)” band, and did some “fiddling” on a Lyon & Healy[1] violin—lost, years ago, when my parents' house burned), and I have retained that interest over the years: I have an extensive CD collection (classical music in particular), and

while in my automobile (alone) am always listening to one of my CDs (I keep a box of CDs in the trunk of my car).

The questions that arise in my mind, however, are: (a) Will my interest in classical music continue into the New Age? And (b) even if classical music itself continues to have a following in the New Age, will *I* continue to be interested in it?

I have given some thought (but not much!) to these two questions, and at this point must admit that I have no answer to either one.

I am, however, of the opinion that culture *per se* is “[epiphenomenal](#)”—i.e., that it tends “merely” to *reflect* the society that “houses” it. Given this, it is to be expected that as the development of a New Society gets underway, a new culture will develop in response to the societal system change that is occurring. The cultural development that *does* occur will, of course, [lag](#) behind the *societal system* development that is occurring: It will be “pulled” by societal system development, and in doing so will (continue) to play a subservient—somehow “supporting”—role. How classical music will “fare” during this process is a matter regarding which I have no opinion at present—except to say that insofar as it *does* survive, it is likely to have a new *character*, and composers such as Beethoven are likely to undergo a *re-assessment*.

However cultural change occurs, and assuming that societal system change occurs in a “desirable” direction, I feel certain that I will find the direction of cultural change pleasing. Thus, I’m anxious (in the good sense) to find out how culture will change as the New Society comes into existence.

Whether I will live long enough (I’m 71) to witness such change is, of course, anybody’s guess. For after I had written a few paragraphs of this essay, my younger daughter called me to let me know that she had just been in an automobile accident (no injuries involved); thus, I needed to drive to the accident scene to be with my daughter, and drive her “injured” automobile back home (it was still somewhat drivable). My point here, of course, that given that the society that I am living in virtually *requires* that I be a driver, my life could be “snuffed out” tomorrow in an automobile accident (among other unpleasant possibilities). Thus, although I *hope* to see the “dawning” of the New Society, there are no guarantees that I *will*—and for two reasons: It may not occur, period; it may occur, but not get underway much until after I “pass.”

Note

1. This manufacturer ([Lyon & Healy](#)) is now a *harp* manufacturer!

[September 29, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/theses-on-no-beyond-marx/>]

“Theses” on—No, *Beyond*—Marx

Alton C. Thompson

Karl Marx,[1] in his [*Theses on \[Ludwig\] Feuerbach*](#) (1845, No. XI), stated: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.” I’m not sure that I agree fully with the first part of this statement, but am in full agreement with the second part. I would add, however, that once one has come to the conclusion that the “world”—which I would specify as the *existing societal system(s)*—should change, one needs to ask—and answer—two further questions:

- In what *direction* should the societal system change?
- *How*—i.e., by what means—should this change be accomplished?

The first question can be thought of as comprised of two parts:

- What should the “*look*” of this New desired society be?
- What specific *goals* should be met with the realization of this New Society?

As to the “how” question, several further questions arise:

- Should the means be peaceful or, rather, should violence be used?
- Before one can even address the “how should” question, one must answer the question: Despite that fact that societal system change is *conceivable* (i.e., can be *imagined*), is it in fact *possible*?

Whereas I am not, myself, convinced that Marx answered any of these questions satisfactorily—or even provided anything in the way of responses that might be dignified with the label “answers”—I would argue that my [*What Are Churches For?*](#) e-book *does* provide (adequate) answers to all of the above questions:

- I specify *why* societal change is needed: Our society (among many others) has many severe problems, we humans are faced with a serious threat in global warming, and only societal system change—of the right sort—has the potential of addressing all of these problems simultaneously.
- I specify two goals for the New Society—that all of its inhabitants have as high a level of well-being as possible, and that movement toward the New Society occur in a way that

ensures (so far as possible) that the “culling” that occurs as a consequence of global warming will “take” as few humans as possible.

- I specify that for a high level of well-being to prevail, people must have a way of life that accords with their “design specifications.” I add, however, that “happiness” is not the only desirable goal; in addition, the individuals that people the New Society should have desirable personal traits, and the society itself (as an entity) needs to have certain traits to qualify as a “Good Society.”
- I present a historical background for the above by presenting a summary of the (Christian) Bible—arguing that that book exhibits the existence of a certain Tradition, one that has been in existence for millennia, one that would be *continued* by what I propose.
- I specify—regarding the matter of responding to global warming—that of the two available options—that of mitigation efforts and that of adaptation—the latter must be given primacy given that the “tipping point” has been passed and, therefore, negative feedback mechanisms are no longer working.
- Implicit in this conclusion is the conclusion that adaptation *can* occur in a peaceful manner. If any violence *is* associated with a Movement toward the New Society, that violence will emanate from “outsiders.” If “outsiders” do engage in any violence, this will occur either because (a) some of them have been instigated (e.g., by the Koch brothers—see, e.g., [this](#) and [this](#)) to make an effort to stop the Movement (b) or as the effects of global warming become more noticeable and severe, individuals “left behind” in the Larger Society become desperate, and attempt to “break into” the Movement.
- The form that the New Society should take—in the beginning, at least—is that of a collection (and later a federation) of cooperative eco-communities CECs), all “small” in size (“small” defined as 500 inhabitants or fewer)—small size having been given a detailed rationale by [Kirkpatrick Sale](#).
- The New Society would grow by establishing more and more CECs, with those currently in CECs then using the expertise that they had developed to help others establish CECs, etc. The *nature* of this New Society would, though, evolve over time, and would always retain a certain dynamism.
- As a vehicle for planning the elements and features of the New Society (among other possibilities), I propose a new institution—the Structured Interaction Group (SIG).
- I suggest that existing churches would be an ideal “home” for this institution—and make an effort to shame them into adopting it for that purpose.

Note

1. Most people say “Karl Marx.” I, however, being more informal, say “Chuck Marx”! (After all, he’s way out of date!)
[September 29, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/a-challenge-to-the-churches/>]

A Challenge to the Churches

Alton C. Thompson

We residents of the United States live in a society wherein the dominant guiding principle is “success.” This means that one strives to “earn”[1] as much money as possible; or gain as much fame (in infamy, in some cases) as one can (and then “cash in” on that fame); or acquire as much power as possible (in part because it is thrilling to have control over others, and be able to “boss them around,” in part because power also can be “cashed in”).

The *motive* for becoming successful varies with individuals. For some, success is simply an end in itself—in that one gains a sense of satisfaction from being convinced that being “successful” means that one is thereby “better” than others (a feeling promoted by the value system of our society). More commonly, however, one strives for success for the *monetary* resources one gains (eventually, if not immediately) in becoming “successful;” not, however, because money is an end in itself but, rather, because money enables one to *acquire* things. And *why* does one want to acquire things? Primarily because one has learned, in being raised in this society and absorbing its “philosophy,” that the possession of *things* bring happiness, and happiness is—of course—what everybody wants, most of all: We are “built” to be happiness-seeking creatures, and so do.

Notice that the *value system* of the society within which we live (as inmates, many of us feel) emphasizes the *self*—i.e., *me*: What will benefit *me*, what rights do *I* have, etc. The paradox here, of course, is that the United States is alleged to be a “Christian” country—thereby being a country within which the “love of neighbor” principle is the guiding one; but the fact of the matter is that it is *far* from being a “Christian” nation—a fact demonstrated by the recently-release [Baylor Religion Survey](#). But a fact—ironically—that the authors of that study don’t seem to realize! It’s true that some wealthy members of our society offer substantial financial support to various “good works,” but the question that arises relative to *that* fact is: Do they do this out of a sincere interest in the well-being of the “unfortunate” or, rather, to be well-thought of—i.e., for *selfish* reasons (i.e., do they do it as part of their “success strategy”)?

In asserting that the success motive is the guiding one in this society, I do not mean to claim that many in our society are not, rather, guided—to a degree, and at times—by the love command of Christianity. The problem is that such people, in *not* being driven by the success motive, *cannot* become the dominant element in our society. True, one *can* be born into a wealthy family—i.e., one that became wealthy because some current or earlier member(s) were driven by the success motive—and then turn one’s back on that motive. But the prospect of such “turning” occurring

on a large scale in this society is remote—perhaps with a probability of zero! Therefore, there is every reason to believe that our society will retain its existing value system.

A question that arises here is: What does *that* fact imply for those, in our society, who claim allegiance to the “love of neighbor” principle? In answering that question, I would first point out to such people that despite their disapproval of the success principle, their very *presence* in the society helps support the Existing Order—which they supposedly have serious questions about. The society that we live in is highly interdependent, with all of us being, en effect, “cogs” in a giant machine. Given this role that we *all* play in the society, our mere *presence* in the society has the function of not only *supporting* the Existing Order, but helping *perpetuate* it. One could therefore argue that it is *sinful*—yes, I said *SINFUL!*—for those who “lift up” the love of neighbor principle to remain in the Existing Order.

What, then, are the options facing one who (a) desires to be faithful to The Way (alluding here to that term’s usage in Acts 9, etc.) while also (b) *not* committing the sin of “offering” support to the Existing Order? Let us first try to imagine what would happen to the Existing Order were all “Wayers” suddenly to exit the Existing Order. Such might occur by, e.g.:

- All being “raptured” off simultaneously to a Better Place; or
- All simultaneously accomplishing suicide.

In either case the result of this mass “[exodus](#)” would be to cause the Existing (evil) Order to *collapse*; for if some of the cogs of a machine are removed, the machine is rendered inoperative. What this means is that the Wayers in our society have far more “clout” than they may realize.

Once Wayers come to realize this potential on their part, what should they do? Obviously, I am not recommending that Wayers do the “[Jim Jones](#)” bit. Nor am I suggesting that they wait around to be “raptured” (something that ain’t gonna happen, folks!). Realistically, there are just two options:

- Move to a country within which the love of neighbor principle is the guiding one for most, if not all, citizens.
- Develop a subsociety within the Existing Order in this country, striving to minimize—to the point of zero, if possible—the dependence of that subsociety on the Existing Order, and then moving to that subsociety. (See my e-book [What Are Churches For?](#)).

Of these two options, it would seem that the only one that has merit is the second one—for I am unaware of any country where the love of neighbor principle is dominant—although [Bhutan](#) may be moving in that direction. But, of course, a Wayer may not be *aware* of the subsociety option because:

- S/he has not read this essay (or other of my essays on this web site).
- His/her pastor has not done so, and has ignorance as his/her excuse.
- Her/his pastor *is* aware of this option, but realizes that if too much honesty is conveyed to congregants, they may abandon church, leaving him/her without financial support![2]

But even if one, as a Wayer, *is* aware of the subsociety option[3] and is attracted by that option, s/he may respond: “I would like to take this course, but I am unaware of any (suitable) subsociety to which I might move.” My response: “Then, get together with some like-minded others, and *create* one for the members of your group.”

This response would, I fully expect, elicit one or more of the following counter responses:

- “I don’t know enough like-minded others to get together in this way.”
- “I don’t have the ‘know-how’ to create a community.”
- “I don’t have enough money to purchase the necessary land, materials, and labor to create a community.”
- Etc.

And I would agree fully with this hypothetical person—that what s/he says has a great deal of merit. For that reason, I “[throw down the gauntlet](#)” to the churches, denominational leaders in particular: If you are as serious about the primacy of the “love of neighbor” command as you claim to be, you will recognize that an egress from the Larger Society is needed—so that support to the Larger Society will be removed. But that in accomplishing that egress, movement must occur in a direction that will allow the love of neighbor command to flower (within and without the New Order being created)—*and* “save” (so far as is possible) our species from extinction brought about by global warming or other factors.

Wouldn’t it be ironic if rather than the *churches* answering this challenge, it is answered by the *agnostics and atheists* in our midst!!

Notes

1. A more accurate term here would be “make,” rather than “earn,” for money *earned* is money *deservedly made* which, in turn, implies that *scruples* were involved in the earning of money. In this society, however, one is able to invoke the mythology of “supply and demand theory,” thereby convincing oneself—and others—that money made is (thereby) money earned. For more on this see endnote 13 in my [Dissecting Laissez-Faire “Theory.”](#)

2. Just as the reason Jesus may have been executed is that he began to use bread and wine as sacrifice substitutes, the Temple authorities recognized this as an economic threat, plotted to get the Roman authorities to see Jesus as a threat to Rome, and were successful. Such an argument has been suggested (if but indirectly) by some comments made by Bruce Chilton on p. 152 of his *The Temple of Jesus: His Sacrificial Program Within a Cultural History of Sacrifice* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992). I am reminded here—and Chilton himself notes, on p. 29—that in Acts 19:24 – 27 a silversmith named Demetrius argues against the preaching of Paul on economic grounds (i.e., Paul’s preaching is reducing demand for the products of his workers, thereby threatening their livelihood).
3. For me, the “subsociety” in question would be a cooperative eco-community (CEC), as described in my e-book.

[September 30, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/the-word-made-flesh/>]

The Word Made Flesh

Alton C. Thompson

Although my title is derived from John 1:14 of the “New Testament,” the subject matter of this essay is not “Christological” (i.e., I do not herein claim that Jesus was anything other than a human being). Rather, my meaning is more related to that associated with the www.wordmadeflesh.org web site, in that my reference here is problems in “fleshing out,” in practical terms, the meaning of the “love of neighbor” principle/command.

It’s true, of course, that Jesus gave a meaning of sorts to this principle in, e.g., his famous Good Samaritan parable (Luke 10). But this parable was obviously intended to be *suggestive*, not *definitive*. Indeed, a handicap that Jesus faced in conducting an “unofficial” ministry was that he needed to be alert to possible accusations of blasphemy; more broadly, he needed to be careful what he said and did, so as not to give the religious authorities an excuse to get rid of him—or (more likely) get the Romans to get rid of him (which they did, of course).

Parables are excellent teaching tools, for they encourage thought, and encourage discussion with others (which discussion can help participants develop their interaction skills, among other possible benefits). On the other hand, however, it is a truism that *knowing*, and *embracing*, the love of neighbor principle does not ensure that one will *follow* it. And although I argued in “[A Challenge to the Churches](#)” that a follower of the Way (Acts 9, etc.) should make an egress from the Existing Order (and into a subsociety), in this essay I concentrate on being a “Wayer” while remaining in the Existing Order.

The point that I wish to make in this essay is that knowing what to do *in general* (i.e., following the love principle) is, in itself, not particularly helpful to one in a particular situation; for it may not be clear to the individual in question just how to *apply* the principle. In not being able to decide *specifically* how to respond, the person may be inhibited from acting.

The person in question may be aware of some of the questions that s/he has regarding how to “operationalize” the love of neighbor principle. Likely, however, that person may not even be *aware* of most of the questions that are being asked in his/her unconscious. It’s no wonder, then, that inaction—or inappropriate action—occurs by those who genuinely *want* to “do the right thing,” but fail to do so in so many instances. The blame for this may lie with pastors—whose lack of knowledge of real-world life, and ignorance of how our society “works” renders them incapable of going beyond generalities. My purpose here, however, is not to fix blame but, rather, to at least identify some of the reasons why members of our society have difficulty “operationalizing” the love of neighbor principle:

- People often have difficulty in articulating what sorts of “needs” there are “out there.” They may be aware of such basic needs as those for food, water, clothing, and shelter, but do not recognize that the topic of needs is, in actuality, a complex one (a point that Chapter 3 in my e-book [What Are Churches For?](#) seeks to make clear. Beyond this matter of complexity there is the possibility—developed by noted psychologist Abraham [Maslow](#)—that one should think of there being a *hierarchy* of needs. In Dr. Maslow’s schema there are five levels of needs, with physiological needs being at the lowest level (i.e., most basic), followed in order by safety needs, the need for love (more broadly, a need to have a feeling that one “belongs”), esteem, and (at the highest level) self-actualization.
- Once one realizes that the subject of needs is a complex one, with several different levels, one should be able to address need-satisfaction in others in a more meaningful way—a way that actually *contributes* to need-satisfaction rather than doing *damage* to others. However, for the former of these having the highest probability of occurring, one must—as, e.g., [Socrates](#) taught—“[know thyself](#).” That is, in this case one must do a realistic assessment of what one’s abilities are for helping others. One may, e.g., determine that one has little in an ability to help others *directly*, but has an ability to supply financial support to organizations that can and do supply direct help. At the other extreme, one may recognize that has barely enough to support oneself, but has “time on one’s hands”—which one can use to, e.g., visit those in nursing homes.
- Even though one may be aware of the kinds of needs that exist “out there,” and has made a self-assessment as to one’s capabilities in addressing those needs, one must come to the realization that it is one thing to be aware of *kinds* of needs “out there,” but quite another to identify the *specific* needs of a *particular* other person. People vary in their ability to “read” others; thus, if one recognizes in oneself a lack of such a need, one should rely on the opinions of those better able to identify specific needs, and follow their advice.
- In rendering assistance to others, an error that one should especially strive to avoid is helping others *physically*, but in the process doing them *psychological* damage—by lowering their self-esteem. As I point out in Chapter 1 of my e-book (cited above), the ancient Hebrews created a law of gleaning—which enabled those in need of food to obtain food, not as a “hand-out” but as a result of their own labor (on land owned by others), thereby protecting the self-esteem of “recipients.”
- If we are to love the “neighbor,” and Jesus’s Good Samaritan parable had the intent of providing a partial answer to that question, for those of who live in the modern world, “neighbor” means something quite different to us than it did in Palestine 2,000 years ago: For example, I can communicate with my “neighbor” in India virtually instantaneously.

Thus, we moderns are faced with the question: Shall I devote my helping efforts just to those in my immediate neighborhood or the urban area within which I live or, rather, should I think of the *world* as being my neighbor? This is a question that each person will need to answer for himself or herself. Fortunately, there is enough variety in our species that if everyone who claimed to be a follower of the Way acted on the love of neighbor principle in a manner chosen by that person, it's likely that all of the world's problems—in terms of neediness—would disappear within a short period of time.

So far I have been assuming that Wayers will remain in the Existing Order, and will cope with that Existing Order as best they can, while simultaneously trying to follow the Way. However, anyone who is giving serious attention to following the Way—if they have any degree of intelligence—will recognize that that Existing Order is a definite obstacle in their path.

My hope is that those who come to such a realization—and also are aware of the fact that global warming poses a threat to our very continued existence as a species—will come to recognize that there *is* a (possible) way out, and that is to take the “subsociety” path (see my “A Challenge to the Churches”). If more would become aware of this possibility, and bring it to the attention of their church and denominational leaders, there will be a better chance of the love principle becoming more prominent—and humankind surviving into the next century.

[October 2, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/land-of-the-free/>]

Land of the Free?

Alton C. Thompson

Among the common claims made by members of the elite and their lackeys in the United States are that this is the “land of the free” (usually coupled with “home of the brave”[1]), with “liberty” (and “justice for all”—as the “[Pledge of Allegiance](#)” asserts). And when our country goes to war (which seemingly has become a perpetual “event”!), it is always either to “liberate” others from their evil oppressors; or to protect our *own* way of life from those nasty “terrorists”[2]—so that we can “continue”[3] to have our precious “freedom” and “liberty.”

“Freedom” and “liberty” are often used as if they were identical in meaning, and efforts are rarely made to differentiate them, clarify their meaning. Perhaps the reason for this is that it is *useful* to the elite that the meanings of these terms to be left rather ambiguous, for this ambiguity may function to inhibit criticism of the Existing Order and actions to change it. For, after all, if we already *have* freedom and liberty, no basis for criticism/change exists. The irony here, of course, is that such claims have the effect of subtly *suppressing* thought and action!

That possibility is not what I want to focus on in this essay, however. Rather, I want first to “flesh out” the meanings of “freedom” and “liberty,” and then ask: To what extent (if any!) do they exist in this country? One often *hears* the claim that they exist (in some pristine state?) in this society, but *do* they?

“Freedom” and “liberty” are both traits associated with *individuals*, with the claim being made that *all* members of our society *can* possess both “freedom” and “liberty,” and *do*. In approaching these claims as a scientist, however, one must first establish a *definition* for each, and then make empirical observations to test the hypothesis that all members of the society have a “high degree” of each. In testing this hypothesis, one must, of course, recognize the possibilities that (a) individuals vary in the degree of freedom/liberty they have, and the freedom/liberty of a given individual may vary over time—and then decide how to “handle” these possibilities in making a determination as to whether one’s hypothesis is either confirmed or disconfirmed.

In principle, both terms are easily defined:

- Freedom is the absence of any *internal* constraints on one’s behavior. If, for example, phobias play an important role in a given person’s life, that person cannot be said to have (complete) freedom.

- Liberty is the absence of any *external* constraints on one's behavior. If, for example, one's life is conducted in a prison cell, one's behavior is thereby severely constrained.

What's notable about these two concepts is that they are defined, not on the basis of traits *possessed* (by an individual) but, rather by traits *not* present. Given this fact, an implication is that in stating a given individual's degree of, e.g., freedom (assuming here that "freedom" is not a dichotomous—"either/or" variable), it's possible that one will *overstate* that degree—for it is easy to *overlook* certain factors that in actuality may play some role in reducing the individual's freedom (or liberty, as the case may be).

In addition, freedom and liberty—although distinctly different concepts (except that both pertain to human behavior)—can be thought of as *related*. For example, if we assume that a given hypothetical individual has complete freedom to, e.g., say or write whatever he[4] wishes, will he necessarily take advantage of that freedom? If the individual in this case considers the possible *consequences* of saying/writing what he truly believes, and would like to say/write, and concludes that this might result in threats against his life and/or family members, he may decide either to (a) refrain from saying/writing anything or (b) couch his message in language least likely to provoke such a response. (One could argue that Jesus took the latter course, choosing to speak in parables because the ambiguity of a parable protected him from accusations of blasphemy, and worse.)

In either of these two cases we could say that although the individual had complete freedom (we have assumed), he *chose* not to exercise it—in the first case by remaining silent, in the second case by shaping the message so as not to provoke harmful actions against oneself by others. Whether the individual took the first or the second course, the fact of the matter is that he was in a *situation* that restricted her *liberty* and, in effect, thereby reduced his *freedom*. For even though this individual had perfect freedom, his *actual* freedom was constricted by the situation in which he found himself. That is, although no *internal* factors prevented the person to act (i.e., perfect freedom existed), as the individual projected the possible consequences of the given act into the future, and determined that the consequences likely would be of a negative sort, he "decided" not to act on his freedom. Which raises the question: Was this, in fact, a "decision"?—a question, though, that I will simply leave as a question here.

In turning, now, to the real world (as encountered in the United States): The discussion in the previous paragraph has obvious implications for determining how much freedom exists in this country—as an aggregate; and how freedom varies between individuals, and with a given individual over time. My interest here, however, is not so much in making such determinations as in identifying *factors* which affect one's freedom and liberty. Thus, I will quote no empirical findings in this essay.

As to *freedom*, besides the role played by one's situation (as discussed above), and phobias (also mentioned above), the factor that may play the most widespread, and significant role, is that of

internalized ideas and beliefs—one’s *tacit* assumptions (i.e., assumptions that one accepts, but is not conscious of accepting). Such assumptions are an especially *effective* factor affecting one’s decisions (as to what to say, write, do) *precisely because* they are tacitly held.

In our society examples of such assumptions are that there is equality of opportunity (if not equality itself), hard work will result in one “rising” in the society (but that social classes don’t actually exist!), the poor are in that situation because they are lazy or have “chosen” bad habits, an impersonal “market” governs what happens in the economy, etc. By accepting such assumptions as to how our society “works,” one’s behavior—how one relates to others, how one votes, etc.—will undoubtedly be affected. One may *feel* that one is making conscious, rational decisions, while in actuality being unconsciously controlled by tacitly-held ideas/beliefs.

As to liberty (the absence of external constraints on one’s behavior), although only a few of us (but too many!) are incarcerated in a jail or prison, many of us at least *sense* that we lack sufficient liberty—that *in effect* we are incarcerated, are inmates.

We all have basic needs that must be met for our survival (food, drink, clothing, shelter), and most of us find ourselves in a situation such that to *acquire* those things, we feel that we must *purchase* them (with some, however, believing that *theft* is an option—a belief that may lead to incarceration, unless one steals on a grand scale; Wall Street operatives come to mind here!). Most of us have not inherited the money needed for such purchases, and must therefore either (a) start a business or (b) seek employment with a business firm or other organization (e.g., a governmental agency), to acquire the necessary money.

Given that most of us lack the interest and/or capability (or financial resources!) to start a business, most are forced to take the second option. In doing so, if one has parents who have been able to ensure that one has had a good education, and has been able to acquire marketable skills, one may have the best chance of finding a suitable—and reasonably well-paying—job (but be forced to take the wage/salary offered by the employer, given a likely lack of competition locally between potential employers). Even then, one may feel insecure, knowing that at any time one could be “let go,” so that the stress that that recognition induces, along with stress associated with the job itself, may result in physical and/or mental problems, a drinking or drug problem (which itself will bring on additional problems), etc.

Once one has obtained a job (not a good prospect in today’s economy!), one must choose a place to live, and this will involve a “balancing act” between living as close as possible to the place of employment (to reduce the time and costs associated with the “journey to work”) and choosing a “desirable” neighborhood: One that offers space, quality housing, amenities in the locality, good schools (for children that will “come along”), etc. The “choice” that results may require that one purchase an automobile, for urban transit might not be available for the necessary daily trip. And in making a residential “choice” one must decide whether to rent or to purchase; and if one

takes the latter course, one will need to arrange for a mortgage, and purchase lawn-care supplies, appliances, furniture, etc.—all of which involve expenditures.

Given that one must eat to live, and that one will be unable to produce much of the food that one will consume (either because of a lack of necessary space, or because local ordinances prohibit gardening), one will be forced to purchase what one needs/wants. Fortunately, usually there are enough supermarkets/groceries near one's place of residence to give one some real choices in making food purchases.

One will not be able to avoid seeing/hearing advertising—in the form of billboards that one passes while driving to work, etc., or while watching television—and this will encourage one to buy, buy, buy. In addition, one will be expected to maintain a certain “standard of living,” and to “keep up” with new products that come on the market. Thus, one will find oneself in a situation that almost equate being a “good consumer” with a “good citizen,” so that one is under constant pressure to spend rather than save.

Once one becomes established, feels comfortable in one's job, starts to have a family, etc., one may very well sense that one has become “locked in” to a certain way of life. One may wish that one could gain some liberation from the shackles that bind one, but in most cases will perceive no alternative to how one is currently living one's life. Only if one becomes unemployed—and especially if one then loses one's home—will one find oneself in a situation where one is *forced* to change one's way of life.

Given that as my e-book ([What Are Churches For?](#)) and various essays on this site argue, it would be desirable for our society to move in a cooperative eco-communitarian (CECian) direction (for a variety of reasons), and that residents of a CEC would be able to experience much more freedom and liberty than they can in the Existing Order, it is unfortunate that someone has not yet arisen to “lead us to the Promised Land.” Especially given that now would seem an especially propitious “moment,” given that so many are unemployed and living in misery. I wish that *I* could be such a Leader, but don't believe that I have it in me to be that person. There must be *someone* “out there,” however, qualified to assume that role, and I wish that such a person would come forward.

Were such a Movement to occur, one could finally say with accuracy that this *is* now a “[sweet land of liberty](#)” with “freedom and justice for all.”

Note

1. These words are from “[The Star Spangled Banner](#).” Lately, there has been the (militaristic) assertion that we are the “land of the free” *because we are the “home of the brave.”* Many of whom should more accurately be termed *counter*-terrorists, whose actions are a response to terrorism inflicted by “our” ally in the Middle East, Israel, on Palestinians; or terrorism that “we” are engaged in, e.g., in Afghanistan. For detailed information on the United States as a terrorist country see, e.g., William Blum's [Killing Hope](#); many of the chapters of this book are

downloadable. A tacit claim that we have it *now*! To avoid awkwardness in expression (e.g., “s/he,” “him/her”) in this essay, I will use masculine terminology exclusively in the discussion.

[October 4 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/ruling-out-karl-marx/>]

Ruling Out Karl Marx

Alton C. Thompson

[In my “[‘Theses’ On—No, *Beyond*—Marx](#)” I state: “Most people say ‘Karl Marx.’ I, however, being more informal, say ‘Chuck Marx’! (After all, he’s way out of date!)” This essay “fleshes out” that claim regarding Marx.]

One of the more famous statements made by Karl Marx [1818 – 1883] is: “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.”[1] Which statement raises a number of questions, among them:

- *What* ideas, specifically, was Marx referring to here?
- *How* do those ideas function—i.e., how do they “rule” (or *enable* rule)?
- Is it *only* ideas that help the ruling class rule?
- Is the above statement by Marx consistent with his statement that ““The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it””?[2]
- Is it necessary to have a full understanding of how the ruling class rules if one’s goal is to bring about societal system change?

In addressing the first two questions, I will draw upon only the “Ruling Class and Ruling Ideas” subsection of *The German Ideology*, and will draw upon other sources in addressing the fourth question. Otherwise, the ideas presented in this essay are my own.

A. What Ideas?

In the middle of the first paragraph of the “Ruling Class and Ruling Ideas” subsection, Marx amplified his claim somewhat by stating: “The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance. The individuals composing the ruling class possess among other things consciousness, and therefore think. Insofar, therefore, as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch, it is

self-evident that they do this in its whole range, hence among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch.”

So far as *specific* ideas are concerned, Marx stated (in the middle of the third paragraph) that “during the time that the aristocracy was dominant, the concepts honour, loyalty, etc. were dominant, during the dominance of the bourgeoisie the concepts freedom, equality, etc.” And (the last sentence of the first paragraph): “[I]n an age and in a country where royal power, aristocracy, and bourgeoisie are contending for mastery and where, therefore, mastery is shared, the doctrine of the separation of powers proves to be the dominant idea and is expressed as an ‘eternal law’”

These statements indicate that Marx thought of “ideas” as consisting of certain *concepts* (e.g., loyalty, freedom) and certain *doctrines* (e.g., the separation of powers).

B. How Do They “Rule”?

Marx did not provide a clear answer to this question. What he *implied*, however, is that the “ideas” of the ruling class are not *independent* of the position of the class but, rather, are an integral *part* of their position. *Why* this correlation exists (i.e., *how* it came to be) was not made clear by Marx; but Marx implied that these “ideas” of the ruling class, when *acted* upon, resulted in behaviors that would solidify the position of the ruling class, and enable the *status quo* to continue (for a time, at any rate).

Their status as *ruling* ideas means that they are adopted by (virtually) all members of the society, but that the *actions* of those guided by those ideas serve only the interests of the *ruling class*. The ruling class, therefore, is *parasitic* relative to the other classes, in that its members do nothing “productive” but, rather, are supported by the other members of the society. Thus, members of classes *other* than the ruling class act, not in *their* interests, but in the interests of the ruling class. This means that members of the ruling class are “freeloaders,” but not clearly recognized as such by members of the underlying population—which fact enables relative peace to exist within the society, and forestalls actions, on the part of the underlying population, that might disturb the *status quo*.

C. Do Only Ideas Enable the Ruling Class to Rule?

Marx seemed to suggest that the ruling class *could* and *would* rule without the use of any force; that, rather, its rule was accomplished by members of a given society all (or virtually so) accepting a certain body of ideas (without Marx explaining *how* those ideas came into existence), which ideas, when *acted* upon (by most, if not all, members of the society) would result in behaviors highly beneficial to members of the ruling class, but less beneficial (if beneficial at all, in fact!) to the others in the society. But despite the fact that those ideas benefited some members of the society more than others, and those not benefiting much might *sense* that fact, no one in the society (including members of the ruling class) was fully *cognizant* of the fact that those ideas were biased in favor of the ruling class. As a result, no (significant) criticism of the

Existing Order occurred, nor any actions threatening to that Order—so that the societal system functioned (and *continued* to function) relatively smoothly. If members of the society *did* harbor the sense that something was amiss, the fact that their thinking was (at least in part) controlled by the “ruling ideas,” meant that they were unable to articulate (well) precisely what was “out of kilter” about the society.

Whereas one can agree with Marx that “ideas” play an important role in “social control” by the ruling class, one must admit that (a) Marx’s discussion of the matter is less than satisfactory, and (b) factors in addition “ideas” play a role in that rule. Let me briefly expand on that second point here:

- Force has long played (and still does) an important role in “social control.” In some societies there is (and has been) a heavy presence of police and/or army troops, and in the absence of a legal system to protect citizens, those armed forces—acting on behalf of the society’s ruling class—keep order, often with an “iron fist.” The use of force to control the behaviors of citizens “works,” of course, but builds resentment in the population—which resentment and anger may eventually explode in violent acts against those forces. At times those violent acts are suppressed (and cruelly), but at other times result in regime change—often with the new regime being just as oppressive as the previous one!
- In my “[*Land of the Free?*](#)” I state that some of ideas controlling behavior in our society are that “there is equality of opportunity (if not equality itself), hard work will result in one ‘rising’ in the society (but that social classes don’t actually exist!), the poor are in that situation because they are lazy or have ‘chosen’ bad habits, an impersonal ‘market’ governs what happens in the economy, etc. By accepting such assumptions as to how our society ‘works,’ one’s behavior—how one relates to others, how one votes, etc.—will undoubtedly be affected. One may *feel* that one is making conscious, rational decisions, while in actuality is being unconsciously controlled by tacitly-held ideas/beliefs.” In stating these points, I thereby indicate that I am in (partial) agreement with Marx as to the role of ideas. Marx, however, did not adequately describe *how* ideas play a “ruling” role; thus, let me take a point from my “*Land of the Free?*” and develop it further here:

In that essay I note that a point that is constantly “hammered” into us by the elite and its lackeys (witting and unwitting) is that ours is a land of freedom and liberty. These claims *function* to make a member of this society reluctant to criticize the country, for if the society already *has* the claimed characteristics, there exists little or no *basis* for criticizing it—or acting to correct (non-existent) problems. Whether these claims were *consciously* designed at the behest of members of the elite (to serve their interests)—or even *unconsciously* so “designed”—the fact of the matter is that they *do* tend to inhibit critical thought, and actions based on such thought. That is, the claims act as a means of *social control*, in that members of the society hesitate to speak out because they fear that they

will be attacked (verbally, physically, or both) if they do (in part because of an inability to articulate well their grievances), and are especially reluctant to *act* on their beliefs (unless they are in their late teens or early twenties, thereby less able to project the consequences—for themselves—of actions against the Existing Order).

- Not only do “ideas” (e.g., concepts) play a role in social control, so does *information*. The major newspapers and magazines in this country are under the control of the ruling class (indirectly, if not directly[3]. Therefore, their interest is in withholding from the public information that might be damaging to it, and in presenting *disinformation* (i.e., “lies”!) that, if anything, puts it (i.e., the elite) in a good light.
- Members of the elite spend millions of dollars on “their” candidates, to ensure that individuals are elected to office who will do their bidding (the recent Supreme Court ruling—*Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*—enabling them to hide the facts of that spending). And when “their” candidates get elected, they spend huge sums on lobbyists to “help” their Congresspersons and Senators to draft bills that will serve their interests. It’s unsurprising, therefore, that bills such as the [Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act](#) (enabling Wall Street to help a few at the expense of the many) was passed.
- Members of the elite, acting through their lackeys, work to disenfranchise those who are a “burden” on it, or who pose a threat to its position, by requiring identification cards (with pictures), by eliminating early voting, by [gerrymandering](#), etc.
- The elite promotes diversions (such as sports, movies, consumerism), so that the attention of the populace will be turned from vital matters to trivial ones—under the “philosophy” that people who aren’t thinking about their situation are unlikely to complain about it, and cause “trouble.”
- Etc.

- D. Is Marx’s statement regarding the “ideas of the ruling class” quoted above in agreement with his statement in his “[Theses on Feuerbach](#)” (1845) that “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it”?

In addressing this question, let me begin by noting that Marx saw history as a series of *stages*—Primitive Communism, Slave Society, Feudalism, Capitalism, Socialism, Communism—and “[saw that](#) each stage or epoch created a new class or invention that would lead to its downfall. However the downfall would not be an automatically negative event, since with each step humanity at large would benefit. Each passing stage would therefore raise the standard of living of the masses while at the same time be doomed to its own downfall because of internal contradictions and class conflicts.” The above-quoted source adds that when the stage of

Communism is reached, “for the first time, humankind will no longer be at the mercy of productive forces (e.g. the free market) which act independently of their control. Instead human beings can plan for the needs of society, inclusively, democratically, by the vast majority, who now own and control the means of production collectively. By implication, then, only now does the real history of human society begin.”[4]

Thus, Marx did not argue that history would *end* when the stage of Communism was reached but, rather, that history would enter a *new phase*. The problem that I have with Marx’s view of history, however, is that I find it too optimistic! He assumed (correctly) that early humans had “communistic” societies, and also assumed that the “final” stage would be Communism. In addition, though, he assumed that *each* of the [stages](#) leading up to Communism carried within it the seeds of its own demise, followed by the emergence of a New Order; and that fact suggests the question: Why, then, wouldn’t the stage of Communism *also* deteriorate into something worse?

What especially bothers me about Marx’s scenario is that it has an air of inevitability to it—as if there were a certain logic to history, and that humans must simply “go with the flow,” for they lack control over history (a view that may reflect, somewhat, the thinking of Georg W. F. Hegel). I must admit that I, myself, am somewhat of a determinist, but that the “seeds” that Marx identified seem to have their basis more in a *logical need* for a “seed” than in *empirical evidence*. Put another way, I do not find Marx’s explanation for why world history has unfolded as it has at all convincing. My view is that given that societies are *systems*, and although as systems they are subject to change over time, the *direction* of that change—as it is occurring at present—gives one little basis for being hopeful regarding the future.[5] I, for one, see no reason for believing that *now* we are inevitably heading toward the Good Society.

Indeed, is not Marx’s view of history in conflict with his statement that “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it”? (italics added) For working to “change” the world requires *actions*. Change will, of course, come anyway, whether we act or not. But if our actions lack an *intention* to usher in the Good Society, it’s unlikely that that society will arrive. In fact, if we believe that it is sufficient to simply drift, by the end of this century there may no longer be humans *to* drift! I must conclude, then, that Marx’s view of history is in conflict with his view, expressed elsewhere, that we must work to *change* the world (in a direction that will enable at least some humans to survive beyond 2100 CE, and not only survive, but have a good life).

E. For (Desirable) Societal System Change, is It Necessary That We Comprehend *How* the Ruling Class Rules?

In Chapter 7 of my e-book [What Are Churches For?](#) (p. 152 ff.) I present a 5-“wave” scenario/strategy of societal system change (in a cooperative eco-communitarian—“CECian”—direction), and would argue that that strategy can be implemented without *any* (or much)

knowledge of *how* the ruling class rules in our society. Thus, let me here briefly comment on that strategy from this new perspective:

- What would make the initial stage “go” are two facts: In recognition of the fact that we do not all think alike, in spite of the presence of a ruling class, the fact of the matter is that some in our society would be attracted to the CECian option, and Stage 1 would consist not only (a) of such people, but also (b) people who—by virtue of being, e.g., retired—are potentially “footloose” and with enough money to undertake this project. (However, help from one or more philanthropists would be helpful in initiating the Movement!)
- Stage two would also consist of “footloose” people, but are feeling the “push” of the Existing Order in which they live at present. Given the CECian option that is in the process of developing, at least some of them may opt for life in a CEC—and will be welcomed into the Movement.
- With stages one and two underway, so that the CECian option is now becoming more of a reality, those in our society of “working age” who are educated and liberal-minded may be attracted to the CECian option, and either move to an existing CEC or get together with others like them to initiate *their own* CECs—perhaps with advice from those who are already “CECsters” (i.e., oldsters who are also CECians).
- Once stage three is well-underway, some diversity would now exist in the Movement, and some of that diversity would be represented by individuals with entrepreneurial capabilities. Insofar as such individuals would use those capabilities to create small businesses, job openings would occur, and this would provide currently “working class” individuals to take advantage of the CECian option. In doing so, they would, of course, lose their “working class” status, for CECs would recognize that although individuals differ in their abilities, interests, etc., they are *equal*, so far as importance is concerned.
- As more and more “working class” people feel the “push” of the Larger Society, and choose the CECian option, a point will be reached where so many “host” people have made an exodus from the Larger Society that those remaining (most being parasites) would be faced with two choices: (a) move to an existing CEC (that would accept them!) or (b) move to another country. If the Movement becomes worldwide, the latter choice may become less and less available, so that those who so far have been “left behind” by the Movement will be “dragged” into it—thereby completing the process of societal “conversion.”

Were Marx alive today, he might refer to the Movement as being of a “[utopian socialism](#)” nature—thereby expressing his disdain for the Movement, because of its relationship to the ideas

of (the despised) [Charles Fourier](#) [1772 – 1837]. On the other hand, however, the situation today (with the threat of global warming hanging over our heads) is very different from that of Marx’s time, Hegelian philosophy no longer has any standing, and Marx was a bright person. As a consequence, Marx might very well embrace the Movement, and provide a rationale for it far more sophisticated than what I am capable of providing. But, Marx is long dead, and we need to face that fact, and get on with our lives.

My main point here, however, is that although Marx was correct in arguing that the ruling ideas of a time are ones serving the interests of the ruling class, the *absorption* of those ideas on the part of the populace is not uniform; rather, it is *uneven*, and those of us who have been able to resist (to an important degree, if not completely) the influence of those ideas have it in our power to initiate a Movement that will replace the Existing Order with a New Order. And once the Movement is underway, others may be drawn to it for “push” rather than “pull” reasons.

Two factors may prevent a Movement from getting underway:

- No Movement Leader arises to “start the ball rolling.”
- Members of the ruling class (or, more likely, lackeys in their employ) become aware of the Movement, come to see it as a threat (which it would be!), and—being short-sighted and ignorant—take action to squelch the Movement.

It would be unfortunate—for humanity (to say nothing of other species)—were either of these to occur (a non-event in the first case, an event in the second). But either *is* in the realm of possibility. Let us hope, though, that a Leader arises—perhaps someone currently living in an “[intentional community](#)”—who can lead us into the Promised Land—or at least *attempt* so to do. For if this does *not* occur, it’s doubtful that many—if any!—humans will be living in 2100 CE. (See [James Lovelock’s](#) web site for more. Dr. Lovelock is the originator of the Gaia theory.)

Notes

1. This is the first sentence of the “Ruling Class and Ruling Ideas” subsection of section B. (“The Illusion of the Epoch”) of Chapter I (“Feuerbach: Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlooks”) of Volume I (*Critique of Modern German Philosophy According to its Representatives Feuerbach, B. Bauer and Stirner*) of [The German Ideology](#). This was written in 1845 – 1846, but not published in full until 1932.
2. In his “[Theses on \[Ludwig\] Feuerbach](#)” (1845, No. XI).
3. An exception is that “our” policies toward the Middle East are controlled by the Israelis, and by Zionists (both Jewish and “Christian”) in this country.
4. Marx’s thinking may have been influenced by Georg W. F. Hegel’s [1770 – 1831] philosophy (see [this](#) and [this](#)—the latter not very well written), although this is being disputed (see [this](#)).

5. For an interesting perspective on world history see Eugene Linden, *Affluence and Discontent: The Anatomy of Consumer Societies*. New York: The Viking Press, 1979.

[October 4, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/trapped-in-a-box-an-intellectual-one/>]

Trapped in a Box (an Intellectual One)

Alton C. Thompson

Assume an individual who is bothered by the presence of poverty in the society, and who wishes to make recommendations to policy-makers, making those recommendations on the basis of some solid empirical research findings. He decides that his unit of study (“observational unit”) will be human individuals between the ages of 25 and 65, and decides that for a random sample of such individuals he will determine numerical “values” for each of six “independent” (i.e., “X”) variables that he believes help “explain” annual income (the “Y” variable for his study). The “X” variables that he chooses are (let us assume):

- Intelligence quotient (IQ).
- Education (i.e., number of years of schooling completed).
- Amount of alcohol consumed per week.
- Number of cigarettes smoked per week.
- Energy level.
- Level of enthusiasm for work.

Assume that our researcher has been able to “operationalize” each of these variables in a meaningful way, and has made “observations” on the members of his sample for each of these variables.

Having obtained the necessary data for his study, he then proceeds to run a multiple correlation-regression analysis, which analysis results in an $R = 0.95$ (R can vary from 0 to 1.00). He also determines for each of his “independent” (i.e., “X”) variables the partial correlation coefficient—which indicates the strength of the relationship between the given X variable and Y, with the other five X variables (artificially) “held constant.” He does this to determine the relative importance of each of the independent variables in “explaining” variation in the Y variable. And because his interest is not “merely” an academic one, in that he wants to use the results of his study to make recommendations to decision-makers, he also makes a *subjective* judgment regarding each of the six X variables concerning how amenable each is to change.

I have assumed that this individual's research resulted in a "large" R value, meaning that his multiple regression formula will "predict" income level rather accurately. That fact pleases him, but he is not content to then write an article, and attempt to get it published. Rather, he wants to use the results of his research to make sound policy recommendations. In a sense, then, he wants to "falsify" his predictions for those with low incomes. Such a goal may *seemingly* smell of dishonesty, but in fact is perfectly legitimate—given his ultimate goal. Let me indicate why:

Let's assume that his research has yielded the result that the education variable has the largest partial correlation coefficient (with level of income) relative to the five other "independent" variables. He also makes the subjective conclusion that education is a variable amenable to change, and therefore recommends to the relevant decision-makers that if they are interested in fighting poverty (and they should be!), they should concentrate their efforts (long-run ones, using other measures to address poverty in the short-run) on improving the educational attainment of those who are poor.

The above may sound like a perfectly fine research effort, motivated by the finest goals. But *was* it? First, note that the "explanatory" variables used reflect biases common in this country, in this case relative to "explaining" the existence of poverty. For one commonly encounters the view that the reason that people are poor is that they are lazy and/or have allowed themselves to acquire habits that represent a waste of money, and may be harmful to one's health as well—with the doctor visits thereby required also representing money that would not need to have been spent, had those "bad" habits not been acquired.

A clue that bias was involved in the selection of "explanatory" variables is that all of them pertain to *personal* traits. Historical and contextual factors likely *actually* play a role in causing poverty, but this analysis has not considered that possibility and, as a consequence, has excluded such variables from the study.

The "fact" that our hypothetical researcher has obtained a large multiple correlation coefficient (i.e., $R = 0.95$) may lead him to conclude that he has reached important findings—findings that will be useful to decision-makers. However, in the process of undertaking his study, he made at least two assumptions, tacitly, that may have affected his results. He tacitly assumed that:

- The "independent" variables for his study are, in fact, independent one from another (in a correlational, if not causal, sense).
- Each of his "independent" variables is an "uncaused cause." That is (and taking education as an example), it would not be surprising to find that a fairly strong—and positive—relationship exists between level of educational attainment and annual income. But why assume that the former is the cause, the latter an effect? Is it not possible that, e.g., the income of one's *parents* helps explain one's level of educational attainment? (A rhetorical question, of course!)

There is another problem with this hypothetical research effort, a problem that is subtle—and therefore difficult to detect—and possibly most important, given that the researcher’s interest, we have assumed, is not so much undertaking research and then writing up the results for publication; rather, he undertook the research out of a commitment to reaching conclusions that would be *useful* (in addressing a problem that he perceived). That is, conclusions that—because the key “explanatory” variable was amenable to change—could be conveyed to decision-makers, with those decision-makers then acting on his conclusions—the eventual result being a diminution of poverty in the country.

But here’s the (subtle) problem with his research: In undertaking his statistical analysis, he took as “given” the existing *units* in the society—likely not even being aware that he was doing so. Of these “given” units, he selected human individuals as his “observational units,” and made his study scientifically respectable by using a random sample (of individuals in the 25 to 65 age category) of the total population.

This all seems “fine and dandy,” but by taking as “given” the society’s existing units, in effect he made the further (tacit) assumption that the units that *currently* exist in the society should all *continue* to exist in the society. That is, the way his study proceeded did not—*by its very nature*—allow for the possibility that a better way to solve the poverty problem was to create a *totally new type of unit*—such as the cooperative eco-community (CEC)—see Chapter 6 of my e-book [*What Are Churches For?*](#) In effect, our researcher got trapped in an intellectual box, and likely didn’t even realize that he had been!

The “moral” here is that if one’s interest is in certain problems getting solved, and if one looks to social science research results, one may be walking into an intellectual trap. One should realize that the answer to the problem may *be societal system change* (which change would involve the creation of some *new* units), and that to reach such a conclusion one must be willing to “think outside the box.” Limiting oneself to the results of social science research may prove misleading—and worse.

October 6, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/khan-an-appreciation/>

Khan: An Appreciation

Alton C. Thompson

Until recently, my favorite movie was *Chocolat*; and some of the other movies on my list of favorites were (alphabetically) *Billy Budd*, *I am Sindhutai Sapkal* (just added to the list), *Dan in Real Life*, *Man of La Mancha*, *The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill, But Came Down a Mountain*, *The Kite Runner*, *The Majestic*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, and *Waking Dan Devine*. But a few weeks ago my chiropractor (whom I see for a problem with my sciatic nerve) mentioned that he had just rented *My Name is Khan*, and liked it so much that he watched it twice. He said that he was sure that I would like it too, so I borrowed a copy from the library, watched it, liked it so much that I ordered a copy through Amazon, and wrote “[I, Too, Am Khan](#),” which was posted on this web site on September 27, 2011.

My copy of *Khan* arrived a few days ago, and I watched it last night (October 3). Fortunately, I was able to watch it alone, so that I had no need to feel embarrassed about the tears streaming down my cheeks—some tears of sadness, yes, but mainly tears of joy. If I had to use one word to describe the movie, it would be *gripping*: It grabs you at the beginning, holds you tight throughout the movie, and doesn’t let go until some time after the movie ends. One might very well say that the movie is *cathartic*, for one feels purified after having viewed the movie.

The movie has an excellent script, the acting is uniformly superb—in short, it’s a great movie, and I would highly recommend it. The fact that it skips around somewhat, both spatially and temporally, is disorienting. But perhaps this skipping was done deliberately so as to help wean its viewers away from linear thinking. Thus, as I consider *that* possibility, my admiration for the movie has increased even more.

As I reflect on this movie, and others that I admire, and ask myself *why* I admire them so much, my answer in part is that these movies make me *feel* good. They make me feel optimistic, confident, energetic, even radiant, because they are uplifting, they celebrate—even exalt—the human spirit. But not only do they affect how one *feels*, they affect one’s *perceptions*. If Khan perceived people as either good or bad, *movies* such as *Khan* help one to perceive other people as either good or *potentially* good.

As a consequence of this way of perceiving others, one automatically treats even “bad” people with kindness and respect, and thereby helps them to become better. If one is a parent, you’re not afraid of your children learning bad habits by associating with “bad” children, because you have confidence that *your* children will be influencing these “bad” ones, not the other way around, and that their influence on these “bad” children will be wholly positive.

Thus, watching a great movie such as *Khan* is *more* than just entertaining. It encourages one to resurrect an emotional life that may be near death; it affects one's perceptions positively; and causes one to act in the world with determination, but with a joyous spirit.

In addition, a movie such as *Khan* helps one realize that if one wishes to become a better person, one must do more than simply read Scripture and other works, and listen to sermons. For intellectual *learning* must be supplemented with positive *experiences*. It's true that reading Scripture or listening to a sermon are experiences, but are not necessarily particularly helpful. Watching certain plays can be more helpful, and watching certain movies even more helpful. (Television had some good shows back in the 1960s—such as *Playhouse 90* and the *Hallmark Theater*—but the days of worthwhile TV programs seems to be long past.)

However, what the above experiences have in common is that they are all *passive* ones. It's true that passive experiences vary in their value (as I suggest above), but even the *best* passive experiences—such as watching *Khan*—are just passive experiences. Thus, four years ago, when I wrote “[Worship: An Exercise in Revisioning](#)” (under the name James B. Gray), I introduced what I called the New Word Fellowship (NeWF), choosing that label because I foresaw NeWF experience as involving *revelation* (from Deity)—and more. Since then, I have renamed this institution the “Structured Interaction Group” (see my e-book [What Are Churches For?](#)), but that only represents a change in label. (Also see [this](#) and [this](#) and [this](#).)

It may be somewhat uncouth of me to bring the concept of “efficiency” into this discussion—but I'm going to do it anyway! I have long been a churchgoer, and it occurred to me several years ago that if the churches were really serious about helping their congregants live by the love command—the command that was common to Jesus *and* to Khan—they would structure their “services” differently. (First, though, they should stop calling them “services,” because no service to one's fellow humans occurs during these meetings!)

As “services” are structured currently, most of the communication is one-way: The minister/priest reads passages from Scripture, reads announcements, offers prayers, delivers a sermon, etc.—and rarely are the congregants given an opportunity to say anything. The question that occurred to me several years ago was: Isn't most of this a waste of time—and worse!; isn't there a more meaningful—“efficient,” if you will!—approach to Sunday (or Saturday) meetings?

My answer is (what I now call) the Structured Interaction Group (SIG), and on p. 49 ff. of “Worship” (cited above) I discuss the potential consequences of SIG participation. I perceive the SIG as offering a *fundamental* (not “fundamentalist!”) experience, that would be the basis for all sorts of other experiences and actions, all of them positive.

Given those possible consequences (all of them good!), I challenge the churches to re-think their “services” and adopt meetings that include—indeed, *feature*—the SIG. As I note in the final chapter of my e-book, the churches *could* play a key role in humankind's “salvation” (!) from extinction, and the only question is *will* they.

[October 6, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/crime-punishment>]

Crime and Punishment

Alton C. Thompson

A recent study[1] reported the incarceration rates (for 2008/2009) for the following countries, among others (the incarceration rate is the number of individuals incarcerated per 100,000 population):

Iceland (44), Denmark (66), Finland (67), Norway (70), Sweden (74), Switzerland (76), France (96), South Korea (97), Canada (116), Australia (134), England and Wales, (153), United States, (753).

That is, when the United States is compared with other “advanced” countries, a *huge* difference is found—a *disgracefully* huge difference, in fact! Because that extremely high rate has both *causes* and *consequences*,[2] we USans (i.e., citizens of the United States) should be concerned with this high rate—especially given that the causes and consequences are likely intertwined, creating a “vicious circle”—a process, thereby, that tends to feed upon itself.

What I mean in asserting that we have here a process that tends to feed upon itself is that when someone is incarcerated, this causes problems for that person’s relatives—wife or husband, children, parents, distant relatives (perhaps) and even others, perhaps. Their financial well-being may be affected, as well as their psychological state of mind; so that a change in *their* condition may make them more prone to *themselves* engage in criminal activity. And given that incarceration likely will do nothing to improve the psychological well-being of those incarcerated—most of them likely being damaging, rather—once the individual is released, because no “reformation” has occurred, the individual may very well *return* to a life of crime.

Thus, although the incarceration system came into being in the first place because (one would like to believe[3]) criminal behaviors were occurring and the public felt a need to be protected from those engaging in such behaviors by incarcerating them, because the incarceration *itself* results in life-changes by those connected to the incarcerated one, and those with life-changes may *themselves* then engage in criminal activity); and as there may be life-changes as well (of a negative sort) for the one incarcerated, the effect of incarceration is to increase crime (!)—so that crime by a given person may, at a later time, result in crimes by others—and the incarcerated person as well, upon release. Of course, as the crime rate increases, it seems obvious to those responsible for making decisions regarding responding to crime, that the proper response is expansion of the incarceration system. But doing so likely will not only simply add to the crime problem but place an even larger burden on the population—both in paying for the increase in crime and the increase in incarceration (and related) costs.

It *should* be obvious—but obviously isn’t!—that because an incarceration system is more likely to *add* to the crime problem than *reduce* it, a solution to the crime problem should be sought *elsewhere* than with incarceration. But given that when crimes occur, there is need for an *immediate* response, there is a built-in tendency for a fixation on the short-run at the expense of the long-run, so that a long-run solution is never sought. And if the only meaningful “fix” is (and it *is*!) societal system change, that solution will never even *occur* to the society’s leaders: Of necessity, their thinking will be confined to “fixes” that involve only “reform” efforts, which efforts, though, are destined to be futile: They are *incapable* of thinking beyond a limited range of possibilities, thus are incapable of thinking “outside the box.” As a result, they are never able to solve the crime problem, and their efforts result only in intensifying that problem.

In various essays on this site, including my e-book [What Are Churches For?](#), I have argued that the various problems that we face—we as USans, we as humans—are all rooted in our societal systems. *This includes the crime problem.* Given this, it would be advisable if more people came to their senses, and engaged in meaningful efforts to bring about societal system change—but of the right sort, of course.

The big question, however, is whether such a Movement would succeed *even if* one were to get initiated. The fact that the United States—no, the world itself!—is increasingly coming under the control of the likes of Paul Singer, Ken Langone, and the Koch brothers (Charles and David)—see [this](#)—and that such people are short-sighted and vicious beyond belief, suggests that even if efforts at societal system change occur in a stealthy manner (advisable!), agents of the likes of the Koch brothers will learn about such efforts, and bring them to a screeching halt—the ultimate result being not only the end of civilization, but of our species as well.

Notes

1. “The High Budgetary Cost of Incarceration,” by John Schmitt, Kris Warner, and Sarika Gupta. Center for Economic and Policy Research, June 2010. Available online at: <http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/incarceration-2010-06.pdf>. The figures are from Table 1, p. 4.
2. As the focus of this study was on costs, the report noted (p. 2): “The financial costs of our corrections policies are staggering. In 2008, federal, state, and local governments spent about \$75 billion on corrections, the large majority of which was spent on incarceration.”
3. In actuality, it may have been created as a tool for social control—i.e., to serve the interests of the ruling class rather than the population at large. One must keep in mind that what are “crimes” to the ruling class are not necessarily actions hurtful to one’s fellow citizens (excluding members of the ruling class from that category!).

[October 7, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/redacting-a-parable/>]

Redacting a Parable[1]

Alton C. Thompson

Here is a famous passage from the gospel of John, Chapter 8 (quoted from the [New International Version](#) of the Bible; the numbers {2 – 11} refer to verses in the gospel):

2 At dawn he [Jesus] appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. 3 The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group 4 and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. 5 In the Law[,] Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” 6 They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. 7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” 8 Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

9 At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. 10 Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

11 “No one, sir,” she said.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

[Scholars argue](#) that the earliest manuscripts of John’s gospel do not contain this story, with some arguing that it has a Lukan style, rather than one typical of the rest of John’s gospel. But scholarly questions such as these are of no concern for the purposes of this essay, nor is the question of whether this is a story with historical merit, or “merely” a literary piece. For the purposes of this essay, however, I *do* assume that it is a record—if but an imperfect one—of a historical event, and I address three questions:

- What was the *context* within which Jesus said and did what he did in the story?
- Given that context, how might the story be interpreted?
- What relevance—if any—does this story have for today?

I should note at the outset that my comments on context and interpretation may be shared by no scholars of early Christianity, but that (possible) fact will not deter me from offering *my* viewpoint on the matters.

The Context, and the Story's Interpretation

Chapter 1 of my e-book [*What Are Churches For?*](#) presents my views as to what the (Christian) Bible is “about,” with my major thesis being that it is a record, of sorts, of the early phases of what might be termed the Empathic Tradition—a Tradition that, although varying in strength over time, has continued down to the present; a Tradition that I have an interest in *continuing*, and even *extending*.

I perceive a “covenant” concept having been created and developed in the centuries preceding Jesus’s birth, the essence of that covenant being (the speaker here being God): “If you [Hebrews] *as a people* follow my commandments/laws, I will bless you *as a people*. My most fundamental law is that you love your neighbor, and other laws simply give “meat” to that central law. Laws that are inconsistent with my fundamental law are false, and must *not* be obeyed.”

Whether or not this concept was taken seriously in the early years of its formulation is a question that has no relevance for this essay; what has relevance, rather, is that it is a concept stated in Hebrew Scripture—so that Jesus came to learn about the concept either from reading Scripture himself or by having it read, or told, to him.

But besides being aware of this concept, Jesus also *observed* that the Judaism of his time had little relationship to Scripture:

- It had become *cultic*—in that it emphasized ritual at the expense of proper *ethical* behavior, with the religious leaders playing little if any role in teaching—or modeling—proper behavior. For most priests, the priesthood was simply a *job* with certain cultic duties, and the Chief Priest in Jesus’s time was actually a Roman appointee—and thereby a servant of the Roman Empire.
- The *collective* orientation conveyed in Scripture had disappeared (assuming that it ever had existed!), to be replaced with an *individualistic* one. This had the effect of *inverting*—and thereby *perverting*—the covenant concept. Thus, the “*help* the neighbor” of Scripture became a “*blame* the victim” theology promulgated by the religious leaders.

What motivated Jesus to inaugurate a “ministry” (outside the scope of the official hierarchy) was his growing recognition of the “disconnect” between what he could perceive as the essence of Scripture, on the one hand, and that which was being promulgated by the “scribes and Pharisees,” on the other hand. Having concluded that the religious leaders of his day were leading the people astray, and thereby committing blasphemy, he resolved to initiate a “ministry”

that would inform his fellows of God's Law as presented in Scripture. However, he recognized that he needed to couch his message carefully, else *he* would be accused of blasphemy, and would be forced to suffer the consequences. He therefore chose to use the *parable* as his vehicle for expression, this having the advantage of disguising *his* "blasphemous" comments, while simultaneously having a host of desirable characteristics—forcing people to think, encouraging people to discuss the possible meaning of a given parable with others (thereby enabling to gain some skill in harmonious interaction with others), etc.

The religious leaders of the time did not necessarily "get" what he was doing: Some may have, others may not have had a "clue." What bothered them most about Jesus was that he was attracting crowds, so that many people were beginning to perceive *him* as a religious authority, rather than *them*, and to be drawn to him. Evidently, they did not realize (well enough) that what *they* had to offer (experts in ritual) was much less attractive to the populace than what *Jesus* had to offer—inspirational words, perceptive comments, exorcisms, healings, etc.

Perceiving that their authority was slipping away, the religious leaders (such as the "teachers of the law and the Pharisees") sought to goad Jesus into committing what they could interpret as blasphemy and, in their having *official* authority, be able to enforce. In the story at hand (quoted at the beginning) they brought a woman before Jesus who (they claimed) had been caught in adultery. They asserted that the law of Moses commanded that this woman be stoned to death, and asked Jesus what his opinion was on the matter. Seemingly, they thereby put Jesus between a "rock and a hard place," because if he *agreed* with them, they would have further basis for stoning the woman; and if he *disagreed* with them, they could accuse him of blasphemy, and make him suffer the consequences.

Jesus immediately perceived that he was apparently in a "no win" situation, and to give himself a chance to think of how to respond, he diverted their attention from the question at hand by bending down and proceeding to "write" something on the ground with one of his fingers. He was not, of course, *actually* writing anything, just giving the *appearance* of so doing for a while, so that he could collect his thoughts. He quickly realized that *he* perceived Scripture as a *forest*, but the teachers and Pharisees didn't—seeing it, rather, as a collection of *trees*, with *one* tree (i.e., passage) equal to any other one. He also realized that it would be *dangerous* (to say nothing of being *fruitless*) to convey his perception of Scripture to these "gentlemen" because (a) they would reject what he said, and also (b) use it as a basis for "proving" that he was being blasphemous.

He knew that killing the woman would be inconsistent with the love of neighbor command, but also knew that there *was*, in fact, Scriptural basis for the teachers/Pharisees asserting that this woman should be stoned. What he needed was a solution that would both save the woman *and* himself, and he "hit" on an utterly brilliant one: He rose and said, in effect, that they should go ahead and stone the woman because, after all, it was lawful so to do (if also awful!), with one simple qualification: The first one to cast a stone should be the one among them without sin. He

then bent down again so that he would not be able to see the expressions on *their* faces, as they quickly came to realize that Jesus had “turned the tables” on *them*, and put *them* between a “rock and a hard place”!

Jesus knew that as each examined *his own* life, each would recognize *himself* as having, in fact, sinned at least once; and that the older—and therefore more experienced, mature—in the group would likely come to that realization first, and therefore be the first to depart, with the others then following the first persons’ lead. Which is what happened, thereby saving both the woman and Jesus himself.

Jesus’s view seems to have been not only that this woman should not be put to death, but should not be punished at all. What was needed was for this woman to be *re-integrated* into the society, while also changing the direction of her life; for the society would thereby benefit, whereas punishing her would be counterproductive for both her and the society—and killing her would send the message that killing *per se* is acceptable. Thus, Jesus seemed simultaneously to have the *woman’s* well-being in mind, and the *society’s* as well. And *that* is what, in addition, makes his answer so brilliant.

If Jesus’s answer was *brilliant*, the story itself is *moving*—the story that I therefore find as the most impressive one in the entire Bible. But what does that suggest for *today*?

The Story’s Relevance for Today

Given that the story is an impressive one, the question arises: What relevance—if any—does it have for today? For example, insofar as it is a *moving* story, what might it move us to *think* and to *do*?

Let me begin here by noting that Jesus’s “program” was to:

- *Do* what he could to bring well-being to his fellows—healings, exorcisms, psychological well-being (through inspiring people, giving them hope). A caution here, however, is that it’s entirely possible that some of the stories *about* Jesus in the gospels were originally parables told *by* him.
- *Inform* his fellows—through his “modeling” and teaching (much of it in parables)—what the true nature of God’s Law was.

How *successful* was he? One point to keep in mind here is that his home country was an occupied (by the Romans) one (much like the countries today occupied by the United States!), which placed restrictions on what he could do. Also, however, Jewish society at the time was highly hierarchical (to say nothing of being patriarchal), and the common person had little “say” in what affected him/her. Jesus had to be careful in what he said, because as a non-official “minister,” he had no standing with the society’s Jewish leaders, and risked charges of

blasphemy, and the consequences thereof. Thus, Jesus was *forced* to be somewhat ambiguous in his “preaching”—forced to speak in parables.

The concept of a “Kingdom of God” often occurred in his “preaching,” and this had the intent of conveying, to his listeners, what the *society* would be like were God’s basic law—that of loving the neighbor—were what ruled, rather than human individuals (of the upper class). In effect, he suggested that such a society would have no class structure—and that people’s orientation would not be “What can I *get* for myself (and my family)” but “What can I *do* to contribute to the well-being of my fellows.”

Given what he was attempting to accomplish, how well did he succeed? The “bottom line” is that the *context* of his “preaching” placed limitations on what he could *do*, and the fact of the matter is that he *didn’t* accomplish much, so far as ushering in the Kingdom of God was concerned. However, the *ideas* that he taught, and his use of *parables* in that teaching, have been an inspiration to “reformers” ever since.[2]

Indeed, it’s ironic that what makes Jesus still appealing *today* is that he taught using parables, but did so not with the intent of becoming a person of interest to later generations but, rather, because he was *forced* to teach in parables for his own protection. Had Jesus *not* taught using parables, (a) his “ministry” would have been very short-lived, and (b) he would be unknown to us today!

There’s no question that “reform” is needed today, there especially being urgency in addressing the global warming problem—for it threatens our continued existence as a species. I, personally, have reached the conclusion that (a) we have *so many* serious problems at present that they can only be solved via societal system change (of the right sort); and (b) societal system change—if done right—could address virtually all of our problems simultaneously. I have written “What Are Churches *For?*” (cited earlier) to provide “raw material” for the use of those who would “lead us out of the wilderness” that we currently inhabit; my hope is that that “raw material” is actually used.

The lesson that we can gain from the parable discussed above—any of the parables, for that matter—is that as we proceed in this mission, we do so carefully, so as to maximize the possibility of success. For although we are not likely to be accused of *blasphemy*, there are powerful interests in our midst that have a vested interest (they think—stupidly!) in the *status quo*, and will not hesitate to engage in efforts to “nip the Movement in the bud.”

Notes

1. What I mean by “redacting” here is that I have collected together some ideas—some that I have read (but forgotten where), some that have “come” to me—and put them together into what I hope is a coherent essay.

2. A book of relevance here is Barrows Dunham, *Heroes and Heretics: A Political History of Western Thought*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964.

[October 8, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/searching-for-a-deeper-meaning/>]

Searching for a Deeper Meaning

Alton C. Thompson

A parable, by its very nature, has an ambiguous meaning—which fact means that a given parable will not necessarily be *interpreted* as intended. On the other hand, however, the beauty of a parable is that it provokes *thought*, and thereby lends itself to a variety of interpretations—both by different people, and by the same person at different times of his/her life. To illustrate the latter point, I would like to take the parable discussed in my “[Redacting a Parable](#)” (concerning the woman caught in adultery), and “spin” it in a different way.

What I now “read” into that story is a tacit understanding, on Jesus’s part, that for a society to continue on indefinitely (in the absence of any external threats—whether from humans or Nature), there must be (a) strong bonding between all of those constituting the society, and (b) certain rules—whether in the form of formal laws or informal *mores*—must (i) exist, (ii) be widely known within the society, and (iii) be followed by all.

If, as is likely to happen from time to time, someone violates a given rule, the strong bonding existing within the society will ensure that the society’s leaders—having not only knowledge, but wisdom—will take it as their duty, first, to determine *why* the infraction occurred.

If it is determined that the infraction was of an accidental nature, the next step would be to determine if the fault lay with a *personal* “deficiency” on the part of the guilty individual (e.g., s/he has acquired a bad habit); and if that is the finding, there should be an effort, on the part of these leaders, to correct that “deficiency.” If, however, the infraction was determined to have resulted from a *structural* characteristic of the society itself, the response should be to determine *what* “fixing” would be necessary, and then to proceed with that “fixing.”

Note that I have no reference whatsoever, so far, to *punishment* as a course of action (meaning that I can’t *possibly* be referring to USan society!!). Why not? The wise leaders of our hypothetical society would know that punishment would accomplish nothing—that, indeed, it might eventuate in *damage* to the society’s (possibly fragile) fabric. The leaders’ perception of the infraction would be that it resulted in a *tear* in the society’s fabric, so that the necessary response was to *repair* that tear. That repair would involve some sort of *adjustment*—either on the part of the guilty individual, or the structure of the society. Punishment would be simply out of the question—in particular if the infraction was unintended.

But what if the infraction *was* intentional? What response would be *logical*, on the part of the society’s leaders, then? In this case, the first step would be to undertake an investigation, to

discover the factor(s) underlying the infraction. The factor(s) might, on the one hand, be a *reason(s)*—that is, the perpetrator was fully *aware* of why s/he committed the infraction; or might, on the other hand, simply be a *factor(s)*—i.e., a causal agent of which the perpetrator had no conscious awareness.

We can assume that the infraction involved here was an *action* by one person that resulted in some sort of hurt on the part of another person—which “hurt” could be either physical or psychological (or both). If the cause of the action is determined to be a *reason*, the leaders should get the two parties together—perpetrator and victim—with the knowledge that they are *capable* of coming to an agreement that will satisfy both, and *will*, in fact—provided that a mediator guides the interaction.

If the infraction was the result of other than a reason—e.g., a personality defect over which the perpetrator has no control—the first task would be to determine if that defect could be corrected (in a humane manner). If the cause is determined to be an uncorrectable defect, the solution might be to *re-situate* the perpetrator so as to minimize the probability of future occurrences of the offending action(s). Only if that solution seems unworkable would incarceration be used as a control measure, and even then no punishment would occur during confinement—for one of the guiding principles of the society would be that hurting people is *never* justified, that, rather, the love of neighbor principle must be upheld, at all times.

The other guiding principle would be that it is desirable to have a *society* that continues to function smoothly, but that that principle must be followed in a manner such that no exploitation, oppression, etc. occurs. Unlike a dictatorship, where “peace” is maintained via force, this hypothetical society would maintain “peace” (so far as is possible) by insisting on giving the love of neighbor principle primacy—so that *punishment* for infractions would be simply, and *literally*, unthinkable.

As I reflect on the parable of the woman caught in adultery, it becomes clear to me that those who called for her stoning—because the law demanded that this be done—were *incapable* of thinking in *societal* terms; that is, they were so occupied with their own little world that they were simply incapable of conceiving of such a thing as *societal welfare*. Jesus, on the other hand, lived in a different conceptual world; so imbued was he with the love of neighbor command that he could simultaneously think of individual *and* societal welfare. And the fact that he spoke in parables indicates that he could think of *his own* welfare as well!

He was, however, unable to protect himself indefinitely—perhaps in large part because of the Roman occupation that existed. But in stating that I do not mean to say that the *Romans* saw Jesus as a menace. Rather, what I am saying is that the *Jewish leaders* perceived him as a threat—there being different theories as to why this might have been so (which I will not discuss here). Because *they* perceived Jesus as a threat, but did not want to be perceived as having been responsible for Jesus’s death, they convinced the Roman authorities that Jesus posed a threat to

them (i.e., the Roman authorities). Thus, they got the Roman authorities to do their “dirty work,” thereby not arousing popular discontent directed at *them* (i.e., the Jewish leaders). Had Palestine *not* been an occupied nation then, Jesus would not, of course, have died by crucifixion—and may not have even been killed by the Jewish authorities.

Although Jesus conceived a “Kingdom of God” type of society, and did what he could to realize such a society, his “program” was doomed to failure. The question that arises for us moderns, then, is: Will those of today who recognize the desirability and necessity of societal system change, and have ideas regarding how to “pull this off,” be prevented from doing so from the “Romans” who dominate *us*? By, that is, the likes of the Koch brothers.

If a Movement (see my [*What Are Churches For?*](#)) gets underway and proceeds stealthily, it may achieve a “mass” (I’m *not* alluding here to the Catholic Mass!) such that it cannot be stopped. Let us, then, hope that this occurs—else our grandchildren (I have four at present) and *their* children may not live to see the year 2100 CE. But let us also hope, however, that the society built by this Movement has the characteristics outlined above. For if it does *not* have those characteristics, it might be just as well that we humans go the way of the dinosaurs. Certainly the *rest* of Nature would not complain were this to happen!

[October 9, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/the-limits-of-individualism/>]

The Limits of Individualism

Alton C. Thompson

Daniel J. Elazar [1934 – 1999] was a political scientist who wrote a number of works, one of more famous being *American Federalism: A View From the States*.^[1] What was especially noteworthy about this book is that although it is a political science work, it approached the subject from a *geographical* perspective. In doing so, Elazar identified three basic “[cultures](#)” in the United States (the members of a given “culture” having certain beliefs, and values in common, along with a certain orientation), each having a certain geographical expression. These three “cultures” were as follows:

- Moral—a culture dominant in Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Colorado, Utah, and Oregon, but also present in much of the northwest quadrant of the country.
- Individual—including the remaining portion of New England, the states of New York and New Jersey, and the states in a band extending from the latter two states to Illinois, but also present (mixed with the Moral culture) in much of the northwest quadrant of the United States.
- Traditional—present as dominant in the southern states from Virginia extending west to Arkansas and Louisiana (but not Florida), and having a subsidiary presence in a narrow band to the north (e.g., Kentucky and Tennessee), and a larger band extending into Arizona, and in Florida.

Elazar’s orientation was to *political behavior*, and his thesis was that different cultures had developed in different parts of the United States, and that each was not only somewhat regionalized, but exhibited distinctive political behaviors.

It is not my purpose here to summarize Elazar’s findings and comments about differential political behavior having somewhat of a regional expression. Rather, I wish to note that the dominant part of the country—both in terms of population and influence—has been the states of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania—states in which the Individual culture has been dominant. Thus, even areas of the country that had a different political culture dominant have been strongly influenced by the portion of the country having the Individual culture dominant.

The significance I see in the latter fact is that individualism, as a philosophy, has definite limits, so that the Individual culture's dominance of the rest of the country has meant that *all* portions of the country have suffered from that dominance.

In characterizing the individualistic mentality, I would identify two characteristics in particular as having importance:

- One with an individualist mentality tends to assume, as a truism, that all actions—political and otherwise—are *self-interested* in nature. This because we are all born with a biological proclivity to be selfish—to attend principally, if not solely, to the “interests” of oneself and those who are kin.
- This assumption is coupled with the assumption that many actions are the result of conscious, rational decision-making. Seemingly this second assumption is in conflict with the first one, but the apparent conflict is resolved by arguing that one, in pursuing one's interests, will become aware of the alternate courses of action “out there,” and will then “choose”[2] the “best” alternative.

If the Individualist mentality suggests [*laissez-faire*](#) thinking and [Adam Smith's](#) [1723 – 1790] economic ideas, that's because it *was* strongly influenced by that body of thought—along with the political ideas of John Locke [1632 – 1704] and others. When Individualist thinking first arose, there was—one might argue—a *need* for it to develop; that is, at that time it served a useful purpose. But what may have been useful a number of decades back is not necessarily so *now*. And it is *that* possibility that I wish to explore briefly in this essay.

If an individualistic mentality is dominant in a society, one implication is that it's virtually inevitable that a hierarchical class system will develop. For given that people vary in their biological inheritance—abilities, interests, etc.—a result of this mentality's dominance will be that some will gain more than others. Those who gain the most will use their income to spend on themselves and their family members; and when such a person writes a will, the property referred to in the will be given to family members. Thus, over time the disparity between rich and poor will increase, virtually constantly.

Now there may be certain benefits in a society having a hierarchical class structure (perhaps especially if everyone “knows his place,” and is satisfied with it), but if one takes a long-run perspective, one will recognize that such a society will tend to have weak bonding connecting one member with another, and that weak bonding can be expected to have a number of negative consequences for the society.

First, some anti-social behavior is to be expected—perhaps especially if “lowers” are congregated, residentially, in large groups, enabling the discontented quickly to be communicated to neighbors, the result being an expansion of the discontented element. Given that the society early on will have discovered that it needs laws in an attempt to control the

behavior of the discontented, and that penalties of varying severity will be associated with law-breaking, when infractions occur, police will be called into action to apprehend the offenders; if the society is at least partially “liberal,” those apprehended will be tried (rather than e.g., simply shot on sight); and with guilt established, punishment will follow. This may take the form of a fine, jail/prison time, both, or execution—depending on the severity said to be attached to the crime.

The fact that offenders may have families means that the family of one apprehended and “dealt with” will be faced with hardship, a loss of respect (including self-respect), and possibly psychological problems. And if the perpetrator is incarcerated, given that the purpose of the incarceration is likely to punish rather than reform, when the individual has served his or her term, s/he may have difficulty adjusting to life “in the world” again—because his/her humanity was affected adversely during the period of incarceration—and may therefore turn to anti-social behavior once again. And because children, during the period of incarceration, were deprived of proper parental care, and the family has suffered financially during this period, the family itself (some members more than others) may become more prone to anti-social behavior.

In addition, because in an individualistic society some will perceive business opportunities in incarcerating others (e.g., building prisons, food services, laundry service, etc.), such individuals and/or their lackeys may become active in intensifying the search for “criminals,” and in prosecuting those apprehended; and also seek to have changes in the law that increase the potential number of “criminals.” They are thereby engaging in activities that tend to weaken the society further, but given their self-interest orientation, this possibility never even crosses their minds: Their thinking is oriented to the short run, and they are simply incapable of thinking in long-run terms.

There is, thus, a tendency for a society within which an individualistic mentality is dominant to develop certain problems, with a “vicious circle” developing such that bonding is reduced ever more over time, there is an increase in anti-social behavior, more and more individuals are incarcerated (which results in them now being non-productive, and places an increasing burden on the productive portion of the population), etc. And because a “vicious circle” has developed, it becomes more and more difficult for the society to “reform” itself—it is too locked into a downward spiral (Does this sound familiar—now in 2011?!)

For one living in such a situation it is easy—if one senses what is occurring—to develop a sense of hopelessness. From the perspective of *some* of the society’s members, however, this constantly deteriorating condition may represent an *opportunity*—specifically an opportunity to develop a New Society within the shell of the Old. And if that New Society is conceived as consisting of cooperative eco-communities (CECs)—see my [What Are Churches For?](#)—with each CEC representing a “building block,” the New Society can be *visualized*. Can be visualized, in fact, in a manner that the New Society’s realization seems to be in the realm of

possibility—which perception can then lead to enthusiastic work to create CECs to “get the ball rolling.”

If the New Society is to be realized, those members of the society whose minds have been least poisoned by individualistic thinking will need to lead the way. They will need to identify general goals for their work, and then decide how those goals can be best “operationalized” for a specific CEC—with the CEC’s intended residents, not “experts,” making these decisions.

In making these decisions, and then acting on them, it is essential that there be not only an attempt to create a New Society having strong bonding—at both intra- and inter-community levels—but a society designed to maximize human survival as global warming brings about ever more changes (most of them negative) to Earth.

Note

1. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1966.
2. One might argue that true choice is not actually involved here, but that is a philosophical question that I will not address here.

[October 11, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/revealed-preferences-in-action/>]

[I dedicate this essay to [Tony Norman](#), whose recent column in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* provided the inspiration that enabled me to write it.]

“Revealed Preferences” in Action

Alton C. Thompson

In Economics, the concept of “revealed preferences” states that the preferences of an individual, being subjective, cannot be observed directly. However, if one observes an individual’s *behavior*, and recognizes that behavior is in response to preferences and to income (something that *is* readily observable), one can *infer* an individual’s preferences.

In this essay I use that concept to interpret two related “events” that occurred this past week (the week of October 2, 2011). I recognize that this concept does not fit the “events” perfectly, but is *suggestive*, nonetheless. In describing those “events,” it will be useful to describe them as if they were a boxing match.

“In this corner, in the white trunks, is Mr. X. Mr. X holds several hundred patents, and is known as a technological wizard who has also been a fantastic businessman. As a consequence, he has amassed a huge fortune—but seemingly simply as an end in itself, for Mr. X is not known for his philanthropy.

“In the other corner is the challenger, Mr. Y, in black trunks. Mr. Y was one of the founders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and fearlessly confronted Jim Crow [i.e., racism]. Mr. Y developed plans for the ‘Children’s Crusade,’ which, in receiving publicity, made clear that in Birmingham, Alabama, at least, racism was alive and well. Mr. Y is not known as a polished fighter, but has appeared before the U. S. Supreme Court more often than any other American fighter—or should I say ‘troublemaker’?! The current protestors on Wall Street may not know it, but they are following the same playbook that Mr. Y first developed over 50 years ago.”

(We could also note regarding these two “fighters” that Mr. X is a Buddhist, Mr. Y a Christian, but those facts are highly misleading—for Mr. X is not typical of Buddhism, nor is Mr. Y typical of Christians.)

The protagonists to which I have been referring are not actually human *individuals* but, rather, what might be referred to as “*philosophies*”: I have used personification only for effect. How to *describe* those “philosophies”? Let me borrow here two concepts from Philip Slater’s *Earthwalk* (1974), p. 26. Two types of “virtues” can be identified:

- Disconnecter virtues: “courage, perseverance, rectitude, chastity, ambition, honor, dutifulness, self-discipline, temperance, purity, self-reliance, impartiality, incorruptibility, dependability, conscientiousness, sobriety, ascetism, spirituality—[all of which] are ecologically unsound.”
- Humble virtues: “cowardice, distractibility, sensuality, inability to complete tasks or resist temptations, partiality, dependency, inconsistency, corruptibility, and so on—[which express] humanity’s embeddedness in a larger organic system—a system that has its own laws and justice.”

These categories are rather imperfect in capturing the distinction that I have in mind, but in very general terms I associate the “disconnecter virtues” with Mr. X, and the “humble virtues” with Mr. Y. I think it a mistake on Slater’s part, however, to use the term “virtues” in conjunction with both of these categories. I would refer to the first group as *drives*, and the second group as *values*. In doing so, though, I do not mean to suggest that the former have a biological basis, whereas the latter are a matter of conscious choice; quite the contrary, in fact! Let me explain:

The most significant “event” in world history to this point was The Discrepancy (see Chapter 2 of my e-book [What Are Churches For?](#) for a fuller discussion). What I mean by that, briefly, is that over a long period of time prior to the Agricultural Revolution (roughly 10,000 years ago) a co-development occurred of humans as biological entities and their (gatherer-hunter) way of life: On the one hand, that way of life shaped how their biological development occurred, but on the other hand their biological development resulted in *changes* in the way of life. The significant change in way of life occurred when agriculture was invented, and once that occurred, changes continued in way of life—perhaps being most notable after the Industrial Revolution (that began roughly in 1750 CE). However, as way of life was changing (and divergence was occurring, so that there were ever more *ways* of life), human biology was not changing apace. As one sociobiologist ([David P. Barash](#)) has put it, there was the “hare” of way of life change, on the one hand, and the “tortoise” of biological *non*-change, on the other.

That is, since the Agricultural Revolution there has been a growing Discrepancy between (a) the way of life for which humans had become “designed” and (b) the way of life they actually live (this way of life *imposed* on them rather than *chosen*, in that one is *born* into a way of life and is virtually required to “go with the flow”). This growing Discrepancy is, in my view, the basis for virtually all of the problems that we humans have faced in the past, and currently face; the research to support this claim is, true, but fragmentary—but why should *that* be surprising? (Some food for thought!)

Slater argues in *Earthwalk* (p. 34) that technological development is driven by a pathological need to control (and expands greatly on that point—so that I recommend that you read that book). And although Slater did not add that that “drive” is rooted in The Discrepancy, I would—adding, however, that in being a “drive” its basis is in The Discrepancy, not human biology *per*

se. And that (a) our “drivenness” in general has its basis in The Discrepancy, that (b) values are rooted in our “design specifications” (see my [“The Development of Morality”](#)), and that (c) since the Agricultural Revolution “drives” have trumped “values.”

How do “revealed preferences” enter my story here? The press during the past few days has been heaping praise on Mr. X, and giving little attention at all to Mr. Y. That is, the “drive” side of human behavior has been extolled, the “value” side all but ignored. You have probably guessed by now that Mr. X is Steven Paul (“Steve”) Jobs, but who is this mysterious Mr. Y? His name, my friends, is Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth—who also died on October 5, 2011, but with little or no fanfare. The “fight” that I referred to earlier was intended to refer to Mr. Technology in the one corner, Mr. Justice and Love in the other.

These facts should give us pause. Why is it that we admire the life of a man who has been driven by a pathological need to control, and “draw a blank” when Rev. Shuttlesworth’s name is mentioned? It’s not *just* the fault of our media, for the media reflect popular thinking; but the media also *shape* it.

Given that, as Slater argues in *Earthwalk*, technological developments and other developments stemming from a control mentality are propelling us toward disaster, if not extinction, one would like to think that there is enough knowledge and intelligence in the media to *educate* the public about this possibility. After all, if our species goes “down the tubes,” *they* will as well—for if my thinking cap is on right, I believe it safe to claim that the media are a part of our species!

What should the media be doing? Not only educating the public about the looming threat of global warming (see, e.g. Chapter 5 of my e-book) but educating the public regarding the ultimate *basis* of that threat—The Discrepancy. Given *that* as the reason why we are not only faced with that threat, but why technological development has occurred over the centuries, it should be obvious—but is not!—that the solution to this problem does not lie with technological developments (as even the brilliant [James Lovelock](#) seems to believe). Rather, it lies with movement in the direction of a way of life more in accord with our “design specifications”—as I suggest in my e-book. What I argue in that e-book is that given that we are “designed” to live in small groups, we begin the process of created small cooperative eco-communities (CECs) within the shell of our current rotten society.

I realize that Slater, in *Earthwalk*, claims (pp. 27, 120, 200) that we moderns may so shaped by our experience in civilization that we are now “unfit” for such a way of life, and that (p. 29) “Co-operative assumptions always give way to competitive ones when one powerful body begins to play by its own competitive rules.” I’m not sure what Slater was referring to in the latter part of this sentence, but categorically reject his (seeming) assertion that if a cooperative situation exists, it must inevitably give way to a competitive one. I have faith that we humans are intelligent enough to create institutions which will prevent this from occurring, and would point to the Structured Interaction Group (SIG)—discussed in Chapter 8 of my e-book—as an example of

such an institution. Slater himself, however, admitted (p. 191) that he had “no suggestions.” Which statement makes one ask: What’s the point in bemoaning the problems we face if you’re not going to offer any suggestions for *addressing* those problems?!

Slater argues (p. 186)—and I agree, in part—that either the species will heal itself or will destroy itself. Indeed, he claims (p. 162) that “corrective processes” will be activated virtually *automatically* when a certain danger point is reached—a dangerously foolish assertion, in my opinion. My view, rather, is that (a) the tendencies for self-destruction will become progressively stronger, that (b) these tendencies *can* be successfully resisted, but that (c) the longer we wait to act, the greater the probability that we will go the way of the dinosaurs.

I think it foolish—no, beyond foolish!—to look to government for leadership into the Promised Land, believing, instead, that private citizens—acting as individuals and as members of groups—must lead the way. And I offer my e-book as a source of “raw materials” for their use.

Let me conclude here on a paradoxical note: Although I believe that Steve Jobs, like other technologists, was driven by pathological *motives*, I do not perceive the *results* of his work as necessarily of a pernicious nature: Technologists rarely, if ever, project the societal implications of their work, and Slater (and others) is likely correct in asserting that the deployment of technology and its products ultimately results in negative consequences, even though the opposite may be true at the time of deployment.

It does not follow, however, that these consequences are *always* of a negative nature; indeed, Slater had the wisdom (p. 200) to declare that developments in communications tend to be helpful rather than hurtful—and I agree: I have composed this essay on my home “desktop,” and shortly will e-mail it to the bravenewworld web site! What is truly ironic here is that Jobs’s contributions of a technological nature may—ultimately—be more important for creating a society within justice and love prevail than Rev. Shuttlesworth’s efforts in the civil rights movement—even though this was not Jobs’s intent! I don’t want to take anything away from Rev. Shuttlesworth’s contributions—for I have much more admiration for him than for Jobs—but my honest opinion (regarding the long run) regarding the two gentlemen is what I have just stated it to be.

When I began this essay, I had no idea that I would be writing what I did in the preceding paragraph. Which is why I am attracted to writing: I start one place, and end in quite another! It’s a good thing that I enjoy traveling! (Why did I say that, given that I’m quite sure that Jean [Liedloff](#) [1926 – 2011], in her wonderful *The Continuum Concept: In Search of Lost Happiness* 1975, stated somewhere that the reason people enjoy riding in automobiles is that it gives them the feeling that they are back in the womb! Oh, well; I *did* say it, so I can’t take it back!)

[October 12, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/better-late-than-never/>]

Better Late Than Never

Alton C. Thompson

Sometimes I am amazed at my blindness; at times, in the past, I gained some inkling as to what life should be about, but that “seeing” has been temporary, and I have sunk again into a state of blindness. Two recent events, however, have helped the scales fall from my eyes, and my hope is that they will remain where they have fallen.

The two events? First, the passing (on October 5, 2011) of “Steve” Jobs; second, the discussion in the adult class today (October 9) at the Presbyterian church that I attend. It was the latter that was of most significance in that—among other things—it enabled me to recognize that Jobs’s life should be regarded as *anything but* a model of how to live.

The past three Sundays the subject matter of the “services” has been some of Jesus’s parables. The adults meet at 9:30 in the morning to discuss a particular Scriptural passage, then at 10:30 the minister preaches a sermon on the same passage. The passage under consideration this morning was Matthew 22:1 – 14 concerning a king who gave a wedding feast.

As we have been discussing parables the past three weeks, I have been thinking about the parable *per se* as a vehicle for presenting a message, and have concluded, e.g., that (a) the circumstances under which Jesus taught virtually *forced* him to teach in parables, but rather than that fact *discouraging* him, he (b) resolved to twist as much juice as he could from the parables that he spoke—i.e., to maximize their potential.

But how to do that? To answer that question Jesus needed to decide his *purpose* in preaching with parables, and the question was what that should be. Should it be to (a) teach God’s true Law (as opposed to the prostituted version of the Law that was being taught then by the “scribes and the Pharisees”? Should it simply be to (b) cause people to think? Should it be to (c) entice people to interact with others who had heard the parable, so that those doing so would unconsciously learn interaction skills?

During the course of our discussion of a parable this morning, it “dawned” on me that maybe, just maybe, his purpose was more subtle? As I read the “Old Testament” (see my e-book [What Are Churches For?](#), I see (as I state in the “Introduction”) Hebrew Scripture as having initiated a Tradition—what I call the Empathic Tradition—and then use Chapter 1 to interpret the (Christian) Bible from that perspective.

What “hit” me this morning is that Jesus not only (a) recognized the love of neighbor command (of Leviticus 19:18) as the key to interpreting the rest of Hebrew Scripture, but (b) recognized

that the religious leaders of his day failed to recognize this “obvious” fact (focusing, rather, on a literalistic interpretation of Scripture, and on the performance of rituals), so that (it followed, logically) (c) his mission was to convey the “heart” of Scripture to his fellow Palestinians.

But how to do that? He recognized that because he had no official standing as a teacher of Scripture, he needed to exercise caution as a teacher—else he would very early on in his “ministry” be accused of blasphemy, and would suffer the consequences. He then came, at some point, to realize that if he taught in parables, the religious leaders of the time might *suspect* that he was being blasphemous, but would not be able to *prove* it. Thus, the parable had a built-in “safety net.”

But concluding that he *must* teach in parables, and *could* do so, did not solve the problem of how to *use* the parable to “get across” the message that God has but *one* Law (the Ten Commandments notwithstanding), *you must love your neighbor*. But as he pondered the matter, it “dawned” on him (I would hypothesize) that being *forced* to speak in parables was not the obstacle that he initially *thought* it was. On the contrary, rather, it was a blessing in disguise, for it was the *perfect vehicle* for doing so—a recognition that must have given him a feeling of ecstasy.

Why? Because he came to realize that a parable didn’t *need* to have a “message (i.e., intellectual content). If a parable *had* a “message,” that would be fine, but its *point* would be something else entirely.

He concluded (I would hypothesize) that the ideal parable had a sufficient degree of ambiguity that it would motivate those who heard it to want to get together with others who had heard it and then together *discuss* the parable. In the process of discussing the parable those doing so might, or might not, come to some sort of consensus as to the “meaning” of the parable. But whether they did or not was not important. What *was* important, rather, is that the interaction associated with the discussion would:

- Result in *connecting* those involved (even against their wills!).
- Help each *appreciate* the others in the group (for it would become clear to all that all had made a contribution to the discussion—from the most “learned” to the most “ignorant”—again, without their even realizing that this was occurring).
- Give each participant a sense of joy, such that it might eventually “dawn” on each that what gives one true happiness is not the acquisition and possession of *things*, but the development of *relationships*.

In short, this participation in discussions would be a “conversion” experience—but very unlike the “conversion” that “Christian” Fundamentalists have taught. For what this participation would do for participants is convert each from an orientation to *self* to an orientation to *others*.

That is, it would help each develop a *loving* orientation, with this experience of discussing parables helping *reinforce* the orientation—until it would become a *habit*. With this spreading through the society, the society would become a Kingdom of God one—i.e., not one ruled by God *per se* but, rather, one in which God’s one and only true *Law* ruled—the law of love of neighbor.

Why has it taken me 71 years to come to that realization?! And a question that’s truly painful to ask: Why have none—absolutely none!—of the “Christian” churches come to this realization? They have been in existence for 2,000 years, but none “gets it” yet! It’s true that one hears *sermons* on parables (as I did today), but why is it that those who deliver sermons don’t “get” the point that to deliver *sermons* on parables is utterly to miss their point!

Now that I know why Jesus told parables, what conclusions can we draw from *that* conclusion? One conclusion that I would draw is that although we may be tempted to admire a man such as Steve Jobs, we should recognize that “connectedness” is not what one thinks about when one thinks about him. Rather, one thinks of a person who lived in an extremely small world whose “god” was technology, and who gave no thought whatsoever to how the *deployment* of technological products would affect the well-being of individuals and societies. It may very well be that (as I argue in “[‘Revealed Preferences’ in Action](#)”) that Jobs’s contributions will turn out to have a positive effect—may, for example, help us humans adapt to global warming (see, Chapter 5 in my e-book) better than we otherwise would. My point here, though, is that Steve Jobs’s life did not demonstrate connectedness, and for that reason I can muster little admiration for him.

The more important conclusion (for today) that I draw from coming to learn Jesus’s “devious” motive in telling parables, however, is that “what the world needs now” is to recognize that church “services” as they exist now are an *obstacle* to learning the law of love because they fail to recognize that the point is not to *learn* this law but to *practice* it; and that to *practice* it one must have *experience(s)* that will result in the development of the necessary motivation. What is that experience? Certainly not sitting in a church listening to a sermon, listening to readings, participating in rituals, etc. Rather, it is *discussion*.

Some discussions are more fruitful than others, of course, and because we no longer have Jesus around to tell us parables (which we could then discuss), I recommend the Structured Interaction Group (SIG)—discussed in Chapter 8 of my e-book (cited earlier) as the institution to use as the basis for discussions.

I would hypothesize that those participating, on a regular basis, in SIG sessions would have the same experiences that those who discussed Jesus’s parables had (to varying degrees, of course). And that when participants become imbued with a feeling of connectedness, they will become “*habitual* lovers” of others—thereby eager to spread that love to all with whom they came in contact. Rather than having a desire to “convert” others to a new *belief system* (a poisonous

tendency of the past), they wouldn't be *trying* to do anything. They would be simply *living* a life of love, and would find that the "bug" infecting *them* would begin to infect others as well, without their even trying—*especially* without their even trying, in fact!

I don't know if the Kingdom of God *could* have come into existence 2,000 years ago, but I sense that it could *now*. Thus, despite the fact that I have been promoting a cooperative eco-communitarian (CECian) Movement, what I say now is: Let us develop SIGs, and work for their proliferation—and then "let the chips fall where they may." For I have confidence that they *will* fall in the right way—and I can't wait to find out *how* they do!

[October 13, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/a-wolff-in-the-buff/>]

A Wolff in . . . the Buff?

Alton C. Thompson

Prof. Richard D. Wolff (an economist currently at the New School University in New York City) had an [article](#) yesterday (October 12, 2011) on poverty, his article evidently suggested by the current Occupy Wall Street movement. Dr. Wolff noted that although the U. S. Census reports that 46.2 of the American population is below the poverty line, a more realistic estimate would be that about one in four Americans currently live in poverty—and that “Another one in four is or should be worried about joining them soon.”

Although a “blame the victim” stance is popular in this country (especially with those not victims!), Dr. Wolff refuses to toe that line, and argues instead that the “capitalist economic system” itself is a major cause of that poverty. He then goes on to note that the normal operations of a capitalist system virtually guarantee that not only will poverty exist, but will tend to become a more serious problem over time.

Although those at the top of our society are likely but dimly aware of the phenomenon of poverty, and are unlikely to read Dr. Wolff’s article, the lackeys who work for or on behalf of the elite likely will pay little heed to Dr. Wolff’s article. For despite the fact that it damns capitalism as an economic system, what it proposes represents no threat to the Existing Order.

Wolff states that “Something more than government interventions or charity is required to end poverty,” and then offers as “One solution: production would have to be organized differently, in a non-capitalist way. Instead of enterprise decisions being made by directors and major shareholders, the workers themselves could collectively and democratically make them. Let’s call this Democracy at Work (DAW), since it entails the majority making the key enterprise decisions about what, how, and where to produce and what to do with the profits.” Wolff then goes on to detail how all the bad effects of a capitalist system would be replaced by their opposites under a DAW system.

This sounds all “fine and dandy” . . . except that Wolff offers no prognosis of the likelihood of a DAW system developing to replace the current capitalist system, nor—and most importantly—does he offer any concrete suggestions regarding how to get a DAW system implemented. Given these facts, one wonders why he wrote his article—and why the administrators of the truth-out web site thought the article worth posting.

Wolff’s article is as worthless as is the Occupy Wall Street movement foolish. What’s needed in our society is societal system change—not only because we have a poverty problem, but because

we have numerous other problems, which could all be solved via societal system change. In a sense, my e-book [*What Are Churches For?*](#) provides a “blueprint” for “pulling this off.” But as I “confessed” in my recent “[Better Late Than Never](#),” rather than regarding my proposal for converting our society into one of cooperative eco-communities (CECs) as a serious one, I prefer to regard it merely as “food for thought.” As I indicate in “Better Late Than Never,” I prefer to place my emphasis on the Structured Interaction Group (SIG)—see Chapter 8 in my e-book—and continue to believe that the churches would be ideal sites for the initiation of SIGs.

I realize that the churches are not very amenable to change, but have hope that they can be so embarrassed by their current irrelevance (and worse!)—an irrelevance that they have had for virtually all of the past 20 centuries—that they will decide to become “converted” (!).

[October 15, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/change-personal-societal/>].

Change—Personal and Societal

Alton C. Thompson

Historically, churches have been places of refuge; and even today, what seemingly motivates many to attend a church is that they have difficulty coping, and find some degree of comfort by attending church “services.” Perhaps they are attracted to a particular building because being in it “reminds” them of being in the womb once again; perhaps they find the organ music uplifting; perhaps the priest/pastor has a mellifluous voice that is soothing; etc.

It is difficult to fault the churches for “comforting the afflicted”[1]. However, given that “Christian” churches (which, unfortunately, are not “Jesuan”[2] ones!) tend to have an orientation to *orthodoxy* rather than *orthopraxy*, they tend to give but “lip service” to Jesus’s teaching that what religion *should* be about is love. And the churches give no recognition whatsoever to the fact (see my “[Better Late Than Never](#)”) that Jesus told parables not so much to convey an intellectual message to those who heard it, but to encourage hearers to get together to *discuss* the parables they heard.

Why? One result could be that the discussion might result in each gaining certain *insights* into the possible message of the parable. Another result might be that the discussion would result not only in that, but in those present coming to a *consensus* as to the parable’s message. But the *ultimate* intended result, I believe, is that Jesus recognized that simply *learning* that one should love the neighbor does not necessarily *cause* one to do so. What must occur, rather, is that one develop a certain *mindset*, and that that mindset becomes *habitual*.

How can that happen? Parable-discussion can become a *ritual*; and as there is “[magic](#)” in ritual, participation in the ritual can eventuate in personal transformation on the part of those participating—such that each develops a mindset oriented to love of neighbor, which mindset becomes (virtually) habitual. Participants in such discussions should, however, engage in such participation on a regular basis, for habits can fade—so that there is a constant need for experiences that will help “recharge one’s batteries,” thereby better preparing one for the upcoming week.

As we no longer have a parable-teller in our midst, I proposed in “Better Late Than Never” that we moderns regard the Structured Interaction Group (SIG) as a suitable substitute. (See Chapter 8 in my e-book [What Are Churches For?](#)). In this essay, the point that I wish to make is that although there is “magic in ritual,” that magic does not occur “overnight”—i.e., in a “twinkling of the eye.” With any SIG evolutionary *stages* will occur. The dynamics of the SIG *per se* are

such that a certain *pattern* of development would take place. It is those stages that I will comment on in this essay.

I should note at the outset that although a fairly homogeneous group will go through those stages more rapidly than a diverse group, I regard it as desirable that an effort be made to make any given SIG as diverse as possible in its composition. Denominations vary, of course, in their degree of diversity—with Roman Catholic churches likely being the most diverse, and smaller denominations (such as the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), the Friends—more commonly known as “Quakers,” etc. being among the most homogeneous). Thus, if a Catholic priest decides to “push” the SIG with his parishioners, that SIG likely would have more diversity than one formed in, e.g., a COGIC church.

Those attending a given SIG session for the first time, even if the group is a fairly homogeneous one, would likely be somewhat diverse in their views at that time with, however, each being somewhat suspicious of the others in the group, and therefore somewhat reluctant to express his/her true views. This reluctance would likely be combined with a certain rigidity in views, so that if one participant hears a view that deviates notably from one’s own views, one may find this disturbing. Whereas some may respond to this reaction by “passing over”[3] it, ignoring it (for fear of getting in an argument), others might respond—when it was their turn to speak—by criticizing what others had said before them.

Thus, with initial sessions there are likely to be two sorts of problems: Some will suppress their true beliefs, and speak in platitudes; others will feel such an investment in their views that they feel that they *must* challenge those who express views contrary to their own. Fortunately, the SIG is designed so that differences in viewpoints should not result in acrimonious exchanges, and as that point becomes ever more clear to participants, those who have been suppressing their true views will begin to “come out of their shells,” becoming ever more willing to express their honest views.

Thus, the initial unsettled and unsettling period can be expected to evolve into a stage wherein each begins to *tolerate* the views of each other. Those who have been reluctant to speak honestly will be more open in what they say, and those who have offered sharp critical comments will begin to couch their critical comments in less caustic language—will, in fact, become positively civil in how they express themselves.

One thing that will begin to occur at some point is that each (or most) will become impressed with the views expressed by others in the group—will, i.e., recognize some views expressed as brilliant and/or wise. They will thereby experience excitement in themselves—“I’ve learned something important!”—and also develop *respect* for the others in the group. Not only will participants gain *knowledge/ideas* as a result of their interaction with others; they will also develop skill in “reading” other participants[4]—a skill that, once developed, becomes “generalized” (i.e., applied to those outside the group).

As this interaction occurs week after week, members of the group will begin to find that they not only *respect* the others in the group, but *like* them, and even *love* them. They will find that their interaction with the others brings a feeling of joy to oneself, on the one hand, and love for others. This feeling of joy will come to be almost habitual—and contagious; and the feeling of love that one develops for others in the group will become “generalized”—i.e., “applied” to the others with whom one has contact in one’s everyday life. Indeed, it may become a feeling that becomes so generalized that one extends it to people whom one may learn about but not even know—such as the poor in the city where one lives, starving people in Africa, etc.

In addition, as one gains experience with SIG participation, one will gain an ability—and an interest—in *listening* more carefully to what others say (and in the process strive to discern “where they’re coming from”), will find that one becomes more *tentative* in stating one’s own views (because one’s beliefs will become “softened”), and will gain self-knowledge.

Given that love is a feeling, but not *just* a feeling, this latter fact (of self-knowledge) is important because as one learns about the needs of others, one will more readily be able to determine *whether* one will be able to render assistance to them and, if so, *what* sort of assistance one can provide. If one determines that the other needs assistance but that one is, oneself, not capable of providing the requisite assistance, one will make an attempt to identify an individual or organization that *would* have that capability.

What would be most desirable is that the SIG, as an institution, be adopted at a *national* level by denominational leaders, to maximize the possibility of the institution’s spread through the country and beyond. The ideas that might be generated by SIG participants could, conceivably, be so tremendous that it would be utterly foolish of me to even make any guesses as to what they might be. I *would*, however, expect that not only would ideas for not only helping others be generated, but ideas regarding *institutional* change—which ideas would then be implemented. Whether participants in SIGs would make an effort to convert our society into one of cooperative eco-communities (CECs)—see Chapters 6 and 7 in my e-book (cited earlier)—is a matter to be determined. My only hope is that they find the “raw material” presented in my e-book of value insofar as they work for institutional change.

Notes

1. The phrase “to comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable” goes back to Finley Peter Dunne [1867 – 1936], a journalist who created a character he called “Mr. Dooley.” “As a journalist in the age of “[muckraking journalism](#)”, Dunne was aware of the power of institutions, including his own. Writing as Dooley, Dunne once wrote the following passage cautioning against the power of the newspapers themselves:

"Th newspaper does ivrything f'r us. It runs th' polis foorce an' th' banks, commands th' milishy, controls th' ligislachure, baptizes th' young, marries th' foolish, comforts th' afflicted, afflicts th' comfortable, buries th' dead an' roasts thim aftherward"."

The above is quoted from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Finley_Peter_Dunne

2. The term “[Christ](#)” is a *title*, not a *name*. Its literal meaning is “anointed one,” and refers to the alleged “fact” that Jesus was the expected [Messiah](#) of Judaism. A “Christian,” then, is one who believes that Jesus was Messiah, that he ascended to Heaven after his (alleged) resurrection from death, and will return to earth at some future date. Whereas a “Christian” may or may not also perceive Jesus as a teacher, for a “Jesuan,” that’s *all* that Jesus was.
3. No pun intended here, of course. (If you believe that, then . . . !)
4. That is, being able to guess rather accurately what the other is feeling and/or thinking.

[October 15, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/%e2%80%9cdesign-specifications%e2%80%9d-urban-residence/>]

“Design Specifications” and Urban Residence

Alton C. Thompson

The concept of “design specifications,” in brief is that while humans were evolving,[1] their biological selves became “designed” to (a) receive, and respond to, certain stimuli from the environment (defined broadly—to include both a physical and human environment), and to (b) engage in certain behaviors (e.g., acquiring food, defending against predators, interacting with one’s fellows, etc.). These “design specifications” developed while humans were gatherer-hunters[2], with the activities associated with that mode of “production” guiding the *direction* of human biological change.

With the Agricultural Revolution (of about 10,000 years ago), however, ways of life began to change (but most notably after the Industrial Revolution, which dates to about 1750 CE), whereas human biologically did not, basically. As sociobiologist [David P. Barash](#) has put it, there occurred the “hare” of way of life change and the “tortoise” of biological change. In consequence, there developed an increasing “discrepancy” between the way of life for which humans had become “designed,” and the way of life they actually lived (which, in most cases, was one *imposed* upon them).

One could argue that virtually all of the problems that humans have had, and have currently, are responses to this Discrepancy; so that, e.g., “blame the victim” explanations lack a scientific basis, and are, rather, *ideological rationalizations* rather than explanations. My purpose here, however, is not to expand on the Discrepancy concept (see, however, René Dubos’s [So Human An Animal](#), 1968, as an example of such research), or analyze alternate explanations; rather, I wish to discuss “design specifications” in an urban context, and specifically develop some of the implications of rural depopulation (to urban areas)—for those emigrating.

Although most agricultural societies of the past have been strongly hierarchical, with elites who have exploited their society’s “lowers” (who often have had the status of slaves), my starting point is more idyllic—what might be thought of as an approximation of USan (i.e., United States) society prior to the Civil War (excluding the South—where slavery existed).

My “plan” here is to begin by (a) identifying salient characteristics of that rural society; to then (b) note that the occurrence of technological developments, and deployment of technology-based products, led to (i) certain urban developments, on the one hand, and (ii) the emigration—to urban areas—of some rural people, on the other hand; and, finally, to (c) comment on some of the effects that emigration had on those who left their rural residence for an urban one.

The Rural Society

At the “starting point” here I assume the level of technology to be low, meaning that the ships that pass between the mother country and the rural society in question are sailing vessels, land transport is by walking, horse, or horse- (or oxen-) driven carriage; and internal waterways (rivers, lakes) are used for transportation so far as possible. Most of the population is engaged in agricultural activity, using tools and implements manufactured (in the literal sense—i.e., made “by hand”) locally—either by the farmer himself or by local craftsmen. Furniture, utensils, etc. are either imported from the mother country or (and mainly) produced by local craftsmen.

The settlement pattern initially is highly dispersed, for most of the population is rural, with but the beginning of a hierarchy of settlements (à la [Walter Christaller](#) [1893 -1969]). Over time, however, as more and more indentured servants[3] fulfill the terms of their contracts, an increasingly high percent of the population becomes “free,” with some of the newly free hiring themselves out on farms (with some eventually accumulating enough money to buy their own farms), some establishing themselves as traders, craftsmen, etc., in the villages/towns that exist. But even with these developments, little change occurs in the distribution of population, and after a certain stability is achieved in the society, that stability is maintained over time.

The significance of the achievement of that relative stability—in conjunction with population dispersion and the fact of agricultural dominance—cannot be understated:

- Given that humans, in their evolution, became “designed” for a gatherer-hunter way of life, their bodies becoming designed for the stimuli and activities associated with said way of life, and that an agricultural/village way of life (as I am presenting it here) involves stimuli and activities that approximate those associated with gathering/hunting, the way of life of the inhabitants of this rural society approximates a “natural” one.
- One would interact with many of one’s near neighbors, for both business and social reasons, and in the process gain certain perceptions/judgments regarding each—with those neighbors, in turn, doing the same regarding oneself. As a result of developing certain perceptions/judgments of others, one interacts with a given other in a manner most “fitting” to that other.
- In addition to that latter fact, given that one wants to be treated well by the others with whom one interacts, one chooses (if but unconsciously) to treat others well. If one *does* mistreat others, one finds that one develops a bad reputation, which affects how others begin to treat oneself. One thereby learns that it is not advisable to treat others badly because doing so has a “rebound” effect on oneself.

- One unconsciously seeks a positive self-image (because one is so “programmed”), and accomplishes that end by striving to gain the respect, even admiration, of those with whom one interacts, and by perceiving oneself as a productive member of the society. Note here that one *does*, in fact, come to perceive oneself as an integral part of the society, not as a mere isolate (à la [Silas Marner](#), e.g.).

In this society each household performs work to enable its continued existence, but no pressure exists to acquire more than one needs. Little giving to others occurs, for the simple reason that no one is in *need* of assistance. If, however, a given household *does* require assistance (e.g., the husband has an accident, and is temporarily incapacitated), when neighbors learn of a neighbor in need, they “spread the word” and that need is addressed quickly: An *ad hoc* “committee” is established, and efforts to help the neighbor in need are coordinated.

Crime is absent from the society, because no one is so desperate—or so deviant—that they need to engage in crime. Mental illness is absent, because all experience the (positive) human contact that they need to maintain good mental health. Accidents occur occasionally, resulting in temporary incapacity—or death in some cases. And diseases may at times spread through the population, temporarily incapacitating individuals, and in some cases killing them. Thus, although the society is relatively problem-free, its members *do* experience some problems. But so long as serious *external* threats do not occur, the society is able to continue as a stable, relatively problem-free society.

What especially enables the stability is the lack of technological development and its deployment (e.g., in the form of products). Insofar as technological development arises as a product of a pathological personality (as [Philip Slater](#) has argued), the fact that such personalities are rare in the society means that the *motivation* for technological development is lacking in the society. However, even in a society of perfectly healthy individuals, there will be variation in how curious and creative individuals are, and therefore some technological development is likely to occur.

The Occurrence of Technological Developments

Changes in technology typically result in *societal disruption* because they involve (a) changes in the amount of labor required to produce a given output (by *reducing* the amount) and (b) changes in a society’s occupational structure—in that new occupations emerge, old ones fade away.

Like other innovations, technological developments by one person tend to become known by others, and to be adopted by those others who can use them—the [diffusion of innovations](#) being a well-studied research topic. Thus, to say that innovations result in societal changes is not to say that those changes occur *simultaneously* throughout the society. Rather, it is to say that they *diffuse* through space in a patterned way—both spatially and temporally.

As technological developments occur in an agricultural society, what typically happens is that *fewer people are needed* to produce a given amount of food, and a migration from rural areas is precipitated—speeding up the process of the development of a hierarchy of settlements. And if technological developments also occur in the *production of goods*—as new uses are discovered for “raw materials,” new products are invented, new production procedures are developed, etc.—and such developments have implications for developments in transportation (e.g., development of the railroad, the automobile, the truck), the *location* of production is changed (along with its magnitude), so that changes in occupational distribution bring about changes in population distribution. And as changes occur in *production*, such changes typically result in the emergence of wholesale, retail, and “service” activities—i.e., new occupations.

In a sense, a sort of “balancing act” occurs in that as some “push” occurs in rural areas, that push is counterbalanced by a “pull” that is occurring in other areas.

The changes that are occurring represent not merely *change*; they involve *disruption*. And as the term “disruption” implies, the changes have various sociological and psychological consequences—which consequences, in turn, have *further* consequences. Given this latter fact—which reflects the fact that societies are *systems*, whose various components interact one with another—it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify all of the socio-psychological consequences that are associated with the disruption associated with technological development, and the deployment of technology and products resulting from technological innovation. Let me, however, identify some of those socio-psychological effects, using an evolutionary approach.

Effects on Those Who Emigrate

The emigration for a rural area to an urban area would involve “situational change” (by definition!), and the disruption associated with that emigration can be thought of as involving at least three aspects:

- They would be deprived of stimuli that they had received formerly, and forced to receive new ones.
- They would be deprived of the human contacts that they had had previously, and would be forced to develop new ones.
- They would be deprived of the behaviors that they had engaged in relative to their former economic activities, and would be forced to develop new behaviors, ones relevant for, e.g., their new economic activities.

Stated in more concrete terms, we could say that the situational change associated with emigration from our hypothetical rural area to an urban area would involve:

- Living in a setting dominated by the man-made—buildings, streets, vehicles, etc.—the previous setting having been relatively more “natural”—or at least more open, and with less bustle.
- The loss of human contacts, with virtually all of one’s contacts being with people one knew, the new situation involving numerous contacts with others, but most of them of an impersonal nature. Indeed, one is likely to find, in the new setting, that most of those whom one meets are reluctant to develop relationships with depth. Thus, one finds that one’s need to develop deep relationships with other humans is frustrated.
- A factor that hinders the development of close relationships with others in one’s new environment is that those in the new environment tend to have interests that are more narrowly “economic” than one is used to encountering. Not only are their interests narrow; they seem to be guided by the belief that they must make as much money as they can. Why? Because acquiring things will make one happy; and in the anonymous situation provided by urban areas, “conspicuous display” (to borrow a term from [Thorstein Veblen](#) [1857 – 1929]) is necessary to demonstrate one’s worth—and to be able to display “conspicuously,” one needs to maximize one’s income (unless one is willing to steal[4]).
- The need to accept a job involving a low level of skill. Although as a rural dweller one may have acquired a variety of skills, one will find that most of those skills lack a market in an urban area—except, perhaps, for skills in construction or as a mechanic. Therefore, because one lacks the preparation that would qualify one for a “profession,” and lacks the “savvy” that would enable one to start a small business, one finds that one must take a low-paying, low-skill job to make a living.

The situational change associated with emigrating from a rural area to an urban one can be thought of as involving:

- Subjective reactions—i.e., how one feels, thinks, etc.
- Objective reactions—i.e., behavioral changes that occur in response to one’s subjective reactions.

Next, then, let us make a few comments on each of those two types of reactions:

Subjective Reactions

- A feeling of *disorientation*—i.e., a feeling of disconnection, both with reference to one’s new physical environment, and one’s new human environment.
- The experience of *stress*—because one is no longer in the “comfort zone” that one had occupied previously.

- A feeling that, rather than being an equal of the others in one's society, one is now in an inferior status. One was used to living in a society that was rather egalitarian, and now one finds oneself in a different sort of society, and finds oneself in a low position in that new society.
- One finds one's values challenged, in that one prizes good—and deep—relationships with others, one does not value striving for wealth/fame/power, etc., but finds oneself in a situation that strikes one (and rightly so!) as simply “unnatural.”
- Because one finds the new environment so foreign, so unnatural, one's own sense of self-worth is diminished

Over time one may learn to adjust somewhat well to the new environment; and one's children—because they grow up in that environment—will adapt even more readily to the new environment. But before that adaptation occurs, one may respond behaviorally to the new situation in a variety of ways:

Objective Reactions

- The stress may weaken one's immune system, so that one develops various physical ailments, with some developing mental disorders—ranging from personality changes to mental breakdown.
- With some the stress may cause one to turn to alcohol for relief. Unfortunately, if this is carried to an extreme, so that it results in alcoholism, *that* problem is likely to lead to other problems.
- Some may be tempted to turn to (illegal) crime, thereby exposing themselves to the possibility of arrest and incarceration.
- Those who are better able to cope with the change in environment may engage in “[compensatory](#)” behavior as a means of gaining a better sense of self-respect. This can take various forms, such as becoming a “super patriot,” a sports fanatic, one who identifies strongly with his nationality, a religious zealot, etc.

Over time, one becomes better adapted, and this will be even more true of one's children. But the important question that arises here is: Are urban places *desirable* places to live?

Some will answer this question in the affirmative—arguing that urban areas offer cultural opportunities not offered in rural areas, they have good restaurants, they offer good entertainment, etc. If, however, one looks at urban areas from a broader perspective, one will observe that crime, poverty, physical and mental illness, unemployment, deviancy, etc., are seemingly *inevitably* associated with such areas. So that if one is bothered by the virtual

perpetual presence of such problems in cities, one will conclude that we *must* create a better way of life for our people.

The most fundamental reason for so doing, however, is that with global warming rearing its ugly head, those living in urban areas are the most vulnerable—the most likely to perish. Perhaps the process of urbanization has been useful for humans—so that some of the “goods” of civilization can be retained by the New Society—it appears that urbanization’s time has passed. What’s needed—urgently needed, I might add—is for humans to begin creating a new way of life—one that simultaneously “addresses” our “design specifications,” and enables us to survive global warming. James Lovelock would argue that it’s inevitable that most of the world’s population will *not* survive global warming, so that the world’s population by 2100 CE will be but a fraction of what it is now. It should, however, be possible for at least *some* humans to survive; but that possibility will not be realized unless actions are taken soon—by individuals acting as individuals and in groups, *not* by governments—to adapt to the changes that are in the offing because of global warming.

Notes

1. The responsible factors being sexual selection and predation—and with Darwinian “natural selection” playing no role whatsoever.
2. Paul Shepard in his brilliant *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game* (1973) stated (e.g., p. 5) a preference for “cynegetic” to suggest that their lives involved much more than just “economic” activities.
3. In effect, I assume here that “in the beginning” the area was a colony, and that many of the original settlers were indentured servants.
4. There are two categories of stealing—illegal (practiced by “lowers”) and legal (practiced by “uppers”—whose control of the political system enables them to give their crimes a legal status as non-crimes).

[October 18, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/getting-to-the-roots/>]

“Getting to the Roots”

Alton C. Thompson

I have two things on my mind at the moment: A phone call that I received last week from a friend; and a picture on the calendar behind me while I sit here at work (I’m on break, actually!).

The phone call from my friend was to report to me that he had just returned from a trip to the Pittsburgh area, and while there had visited [Old Economy](#) a short distance from Pittsburgh. He knew that I would be interested in learning about his trip, because four years ago we had visited [New Harmony](#), Indiana, which had been established in the early 1800s by [Robert Owen](#). (Actually, there was already a community at that site, one founded by “Father” [George Rapp](#), who sold the community to Owen, and then moved the “Rappites” to form Economy in Pennsylvania.

While we were viewing the wall map of the famous [Maximilian-Bodmer](#) expedition, I noticed a settlement named “Economy” at the site of present-day Saukville, Wisconsin (just north of Milwaukee). This aroused our curiosity, because we were aware of the Economy in the Pittsburgh area, and wondered if the one in Wisconsin had any connection to the one in Pennsylvania. Thus, when we got back to Wisconsin, we began investigating the matter.

We found, through our research, that the map we had viewed was based on the 1839 map of the United States created by noted cartographer [Henry S. Tanner](#). but also (eventually) reached the conclusion that there had never been an “Economy” in Wisconsin. We wondered, then, why Tanner had placed “Economy” on his map, but were [unable to answer](#) that question.

The calendar picture is of my three grandchildren (a fourth arrived on September 8). In the picture our son’s daughter (now 11) is on the left, his son (now 8) is on the right, and sitting between the two is our older daughter’s daughter (now about 2 ½). All three are smiling, with the granddaughter in the center beaming at her female cousin. There is pure joy on her face—the sort of joy that only the very young can experience, I suppose.

What’s the connection between that picture and the phone call? When I look at that picture, I can’t help thinking about the future—the sort of future that’s in store for my grandchildren. Chris Hedges in his “[A Movement Too Big to Fail](#)” gives this quote from Martin Luther King:

“For years, I labored with the idea of reforming the existing institutions in the South, a little change here, a little change there,” King said shortly before he was assassinated. “Now I feel quite differently. I think you’ve got to have a reconstruction of the entire system, a revolution of values.”

I'm not sure why Hedges gave that quote, however, because he concluded his essay by stating:

What took place early Friday morning in Zuccotti Park was the first salvo in a long struggle for justice. It signaled a step backward by the corporate state in the face of popular pressure. And it was carried out by ordinary men and women who sleep at night on concrete, get soaked in rainstorms, eat donated food and have nothing as weapons but their dignity, resilience and courage. It is they, and they alone, who hold out the possibility of salvation. And if we join them we might have a chance.

King had stated his belief that we need “a reconstruction of the entire [societal] system,” but Hedges seems somehow to have missed that point. Thus, I find Hedges's column highly disappointing.

It's unfortunate that Dr. Martin Luther King was not given a chance to present his ideas regarding “reconstruction,” but in his absence we must attempt to discern what he had in mind, and then act to bring about change. We must, however, modify King's concern for social justice by adding to it a concern for our children's and grandchildren's *future*—a future that is being threatened by global warming. Granted that not all scientists agree with Dr. James Lovelock that by 2100 CE the world's population will be severely reduced by global warming. But is it not wisest to err on the side of caution, and therefore take Lovelock's prediction seriously?

I have tried to do my part by writing [What Are Churches For?](#) and various [essays](#) for this web site. What is needed, however, is for more people to get involved in generating ideas, and for someone to then come along to start implementing the best ideas that are put forth. I feel frustrated that I am not able to do more than I have done. My hope, though, is that if more start thinking in more “radical” terms, a sufficient mass will be built up that change will become inevitable.

Note that in using the term “radical” I hope that I am not calling to mind wild-eyed, bomb-throwing extremists, for that is not what I intend at all. Rather, I mean by “radical,” “getting to the roots” of our problems, and then acting in a manner consistent with those roots.

The settlement that once existed at Economy, Pennsylvania, was but one of the “utopian” communities that graced this land during the 19th century. If we would study these communities carefully—the [literature](#) on them is vast—we might be able to generate all sorts of great ideas having applicability for our society today. It's essential that we start generating, and implementing, such ideas before it's too late to adapt to the “climate change” that's in the offing.

[October 19, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/a-recipe-for-success/>]

A Recipe For Success?

Alton C. Thompson

An important, if unrecognized, “chapter” of American history has been the “intentional communities” that have come and gone. A few of these communities are fairly well-known—e.g., New Harmony, Amana, the Shaker communities—but those are but a “tip of the iceberg.” This [listing](#) of such communities—which bills itself as only a “partial” listing!—runs to 27 pages, and demonstrates that if only from a *numerical* standpoint, intentional communities have been an important part of our history.

One must admit, however, that most of these communities were short-lived—the Shakers being perhaps the most notable exception; and what makes the longevity of the Shakers so surprising is that “natural increase” played no role in their existence.

Why did so many of these communities “bomb”?—as one [article](#) has put it. (The article discussed four communities that “bombed”—Brook Farm and Fruitlands in Massachusetts, the 19 Shaker communities, and Pullman, south of Chicago.) The article in question asserted that these communities “whizzed and sputtered thanks to human nature.” But is that the *real* reason they “bombed”? And what is “human nature” anyway?

We Westerners have the bad habit of pulling things out of their contexts, an example being that when we offer an explanation for why people behave “badly,” we tend to simply say “human nature.” In effect, we thereby claim that people are “programmed” to be anti-social, and that they will only behave “decently” if they are *trained/educated* so to do.

The problem with such an explanation is that it shows abysmal ignorance of human history, viewed from a biological perspective. As I have noted in other essays, humans developed biologically in response to the gatherer-hunter way of life that they had, in that that way of life provided direction to how their biology developed. What I have not commented on so far, however, is that “gatherer-hunter way of life” is a shorthand way of referring to a way of life that, although *centered* on gathering-hunting, involved any number of behaviors *in addition* to those associated with the acquisition of food.

Those additional activities included sexual intercourse, child care resulting from sexual intercourse, and various social interactions with others in one’s group. I suspect that the child care that [Jean Liedloff](#) observed while living with the Yequana in Venezuela was typical with early humans (see [this](#) and [this](#)):

- constant physical contact with his mother (or another familiar caregiver as needed) from birth;
- sleeping in his parents' bed, in constant physical contact, until he leaves of his own volition;
- breastfeeding "on cue" — nursing in response to his own body's signals;
- being constantly carried in arms or otherwise in contact with someone, usually his mother, and allowed to observe (or nurse, or sleep) while the person carrying him goes about his or her business — until the infant begins creeping, then crawling on his own impulse, usually at six to eight months;
- having caregivers immediately respond to his signals (squirming, crying, etc.), without judgment, displeasure, or invalidation of his needs, yet showing no undue concern nor making him the constant center of attention;
- sensing (and fulfilling) his elders' expectations that he is innately social and cooperative and has strong self-preservation instincts, and that he is welcome and worthy.

One could argue (I certainly would!) that while our species was evolving, we became (somehow) “designed” for the sort of child care described by Liedloff—**and** also became designed for the total way of life that was associated with that child care. That is, a “package deal” came into being over the course of many centuries—which fact means that the very *concept* of “human nature” is a meaningless one, so that the term should be expunged from the language.

If a person who has undergone the sort of child care described above were to be snatched from his or her parents, and adopted by a “civilized” couple, that child would be a “fish out of the water”: The child had become “designed” for a certain way of life (but didn’t *know* that intellectually, of course), but finds itself being forced into a mold for which it was not designed. How can it be expected to adapt to that “unnatural” way of life? It may be able to (somewhat), true, but it is not to its *interests* as a human so to do.

Most of us were “lucky” enough to have been *born* into a “civilized” society, so that we have had an unnatural life from the very beginning (!). Because of that fact, if we decide *intellectually* that civilization is “the pits” and that we need to restore a more natural way of life, we will be so saddled with the pathologies of civilization that we may have difficulty establishing an intentional community that will have longevity. Given this, might this not help explain why so many intentional communities of the past failed? They failed not because of our “human nature” but because of our *socialized* nature—a “nature” not easily overcome.

The “moral” for those who would create intentional communities today? Recognize two things: First, despite what you think, you have been distorted from your true selves by your “imprisonment” in civilization; second, if you make a concerted effort to raise your children following the above principles, and have faith that your *children*, at least, will be able to create the Good Society, you may acquire the courage to persist in your efforts—and may succeed.

The (future) Good Society cannot be envisioned at present—except to say that it will involve “natural” practices combined with the best of what civilization has to offer. *What* that “best” might be remains to be seen.

[October 20, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/the-long-the-short-of-it/>]

The Long and the Short of It

Alton C. Thompson

David Michael Green, in his “[We Are Not Your Human Resources](#),” has summed up our current situation well:

Suppose you were asked to play ‘Sim America’[1] and create from whole cloth the conditions you thought most likely to produce a vibrant political left, rising up to reform the country, as it did during the 1930s and 1960s. What factors might you include in your blueprint? How about a nation riddled with economic insecurity at best and widespread real suffering at worst? Check. Rampant and unremitting unemployment? Check. A rapacious class of financial predators and wealthy plutocrats who have taken every penny of economic growth for themselves over the last three decades, leaving only stagnation for the rest of us? Check. A distribution of wealth so skewed toward the rich that it would embarrass Zimbabwe? Check. A political class completely unresponsive to the needs of the people and devoted instead to serving the gluttonous pigs whose money puts them in office? Check. A massively broken health care system devoted to profits instead of health? Check. Endless government spending of taxpayer money to bail out the disastrous bets of sociopathic Wall Street nihilists and their destruction machines, combined with zero support for ordinary citizens struggling with ballooning debt and underwater mortgages? Check. A generation of downsized middle-aged workers who know they will never again be able to restore the basic economic stability they once enjoyed? Check. A generation of young people looking ahead to lives of lousy jobs (when any at all can be found), lousy pay, massive debt, massive taxes to pay for previous borrowing, epic environmental destruction, endless wars, and living at home with their parents rather than starting families of their own? Check. A discredited far-right previous government whose crony capitalist policies made profound and direct contributions to all of the above? Check.

Leaves one breathless, doesn’t it!

The question, however, is what to *do* about these various problems—besides participating in one of the protests currently going on “in your neighborhood.” And my answer, in brief, is that we need to recognize that on the one hand we *must* live in the present (i.e., in the short run) but that, on the other hand, one thing that civilization—and its science in particular—has enabled us to do is look into the *future*. So that given that capability, we are shirking our duty as humans if we fail so to do.

Looking into the future is, of course, nothing new: Going back at least to Plato, certain individuals have looked into the future and projected their *ideals* into it, hoping that those ideals

would be realized at some point in the future. What has not been possible until recently, however, is to make *predictions* into the future based on scientific knowledge (e.g., the laws of physics)—predictions that have the form, “If such-and-such is done between T_1 and T_2 , such-and-such will occur in consequence,” where the “such-and-such” in each case is expressed quantitatively.

Thus (to take one highly important example), a little over a century ago Swedish scientist Svante Arrhenius [1859 – 1927]—drawing on the work of some earlier scientists[2]—discovered the “greenhouse effect.” That is, he discovered that temperatures on the earth’s surface were influenced not only by factors such as sun angle and length of day, but by the presence of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere: As the level of CO_2 in the atmosphere varied over time, air temperatures at the earth’s surface would be affected, thereby also varying over time. His discovery, in brief: The higher the concentration of CO_2 in the atmosphere, the more heat energy re-re-radiating away from earth would be “trapped,” thereby heating earth’s atmosphere—i.e., there would be a “greenhouse effect.”

With our burning of “fossil fuels”—coal, oil, natural gas, etc.—we in effect take carbon that had been safely stored under the earth’s surface for eons and transfer it to our atmosphere. (Commercials for the energy industry like to tout natural gas as a “clean” energy source—which it is, in certain respects—but the burning of natural gas involves this transfer just as the burning of coal does.) The burning of wood also results in a transfer of carbon to our atmosphere, but with this difference: As a tree is growing, it is “breathing” in CO_2 (thereby removing CO_2 from the atmosphere), so that when wood is burned, there is no net gain of CO_2 in the atmosphere (assuming that the two factors are kept in balance).

We know that “pouring” greenhouse gases into the atmosphere will raise the temperature of the earth’s atmosphere, and we also know that as we cause such an increase, we set in motion a process that tends to “feed upon itself.” We know, for example, that as atmospheric temperature increases, more and more permafrost becomes thawed, thereby releasing methane gas—a gas about 20 times more potent as a greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide, thereby

Given that we have this knowledge, one would think that humans—an “intelligent” species, so it is claimed—would “cease and desist,” so far as the use of fossil fuels is concerned. But not only is there little evidence of a move in that direction, there is even less evidence of efforts to *adapt* to the inevitable changes that will be occurring—that *are* occurring—in atmospheric phenomena as global warming continues.

What is particularly puzzling about our “intelligent” species is that we’re not even good at dealing with the *short-run*! For one thing, we treat the various problems that we have as isolated one from another—encouraging individuals to become specialists regarding one problem or another. (As if we can’t confine the curse of specialization to the economic realm!) And in

coming up with responses to a given problem, we engage in actions of a “knee jerk” variety rather than actions calculated to solve the problem in question.

Case in point: Those who recognize Wall Street as a problem (and who doesn’t!) engage in protest marches—assuming that those they are protesting against are listening, paying attention. The scoundrels *may* take notice of these protests, but what’s the likelihood that they will “cave in” to demands that are yelled out or printed on signs? (A rhetorical question, needless to say!) Or there may be talk of “voting the rascals out” of office—as if the new bunch won’t be (also) corrupted by money; and even if they aren’t, will be able to accomplish anything, given that they are in such a minority.

Perhaps such actions had some positive effects in the past, but the society that we are living in at present is so corrupt, so dominated by a small, selfish, vicious elite, that there is little reason for believing that the old methods will work now.

There’s got to be a better strategy to use in the short run. I don’t know what it might be, but I suspect that it will involve individuals developing new institutions within the rotten framework of the Existing Order, and encouraging others to join them in those institutions. I also suspect that the churches *could* play a huge role here—but have serious doubts that they will.

The problems that we face in the present are of an urgent nature, and must be addressed. In doing so, however, they must be addressed in an intelligent, meaningful manner.

But however we decide to address our problems from a short-run standpoint, we must not lose sight of the long run—the fact that global warming poses a serious threat to human existence, and if, e.g., [James Lovelock](#) is correct, we have passed a “tipping point” such that it is no longer possible to halt global warming, so that our only option is to adapt to it as best we can.

The challenges that we face are serious ones—a point that cannot be overemphasized. One would like to think, however, that we humans are intelligent and creative enough that we can arrive at workable solutions to those problems. The only question that I have is: Having done so, will we be able to marshal the resources needed to then *act* on those solutions?

Notes

1. I was wondering, too, about what “[Sim America](#)” was all about! My excuse is that it’s been a long time since I was young.
2. Such as Joseph Fourier [1768 – 1830], Josef Stefan [1835 – 1893], and Ludwig Boltzmann [1844 – 1906].

[October 20, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/our-consumption-disease/>]

Our Consumption Disease

Alton C. Thompson

Marketing consultant Victor Lebow began “The Real Meaning of Consumer Demand” section of his “[Price Competition in 1955](#)” (*Journal of Retailing*) by stating:

Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfactions, our ego satisfactions, in consumption. The measure of social status, of social acceptance, of prestige, is now to be found in our consumptive patterns. The very meaning and significance of our lives today expressed in consumptive terms. The greater the pressures upon the individual to conform to safe and accepted social standards, the more does he tend to express his aspirations and his individuality in terms of what he wears, drives, eats- his home, his car, his pattern of food serving, his hobbies.

Lebow’s basic point here, seemingly, was that to keep the economic engine running smoothly, it was necessary that the citizens of the United States abandon their role as *citizens* (as, that is, individuals with certain rights and responsibilities) and, instead make themselves *slaves* to the economy—this enslavement being necessary because our economy had become “enormously productive.”

But it was not enough, argued Lebow, that we abandon our role as *citizens*. Given the all-importance of the economy—the “fact” that it *had* to become our master—we needed to (a) cease thinking of buying/using goods as simply *necessary* “things to do,” and elevate those actions into *rituals*; we needed (b) to abandon the religion of our youth and instead “seek our spiritual satisfactions” in consumption; and we now needed (c) to derive our sense of self-worth, not from a knowledge that we were productive members of our society, and “good” people, but from status-seeking based on maximizing one’s consumption, and displaying it “conspicuously” (to use [Veblenian](#) language).

Reading Lebow’s article today is like reading a horror story—except that what Lebow advocated in 1955 has become the grim reality of today. For despite the fact that our country is blanketed with churches, the God of [Mammon](#) is the undisputed God worshiped in this country at present. Perhaps the forces of Mammon have been too powerful for the churches to counter? Or did the churches become co-opted by the consumerist movement? (A rhetorical question! After all, wouldn’t confronting this movement mean losing parishioners?!)

What’s wrong with consumerism? A better question is what’s *right* with consumerism (!), but let me here identify the principal reasons why *I* object to consumerism:

- It is *diversionary*, in that (aided by advertisements, commercials) it diverts one's attention from everything that's important in life. I'm sure that all of us know people who are difficult to *engage* in conversation because their intellectual orientation is to what's out there to purchase, or what they've just purchased ("You should see the features this product has!")
- It's a *trap*—in that a given purchase often, of necessity, leads to further purchases. For example, when you purchase an automobile, you must purchase insurance, you must service the vehicle periodically, you must purchase fuel every few days (unless it is an electric car), you must have it washed occasionally, etc.
- Consumerism encourages one (with the help of advertising!) to believe that one gains well-being from consumption (the more you consume, the happier you'll be), and that one gains the esteem of others by conspicuously displaying what one purchases. It thereby blinds one to the fact that true well-being comes especially from developing deep relationships with others; and because it tends to make people increasingly shallow, it makes the development of such relationships increasingly difficult, if not impossible.
- Not only does consumerism promote shallowness and shallow relationships, it promotes shallow thinking. A recent [study](#) of college students has found that students increasingly lack an ability to think critically and creatively, suggesting that the Economy's need for mindless consumers is adversely affecting textbook publishers, teachers, and students, and interactions between those three.
- The shallow thinking promoted by consumerism helps explain why consumers tend to lack an interest in *how* the products they consume are made. Are they made with low-paid, exploited labor? Does the production and transportation of the products they consume involve the emission of "greenhouse" gases? Questions such as these simply don't occur to those with a mental fixation on buying and using products.

"Consumption" is what [tuberculosis](#) used to be called. We still have the disease of consumption, but it has taken on a new form. If one has today's disease of consumption, one does not go to a medical doctor; indeed, one is regarded as perfectly healthy! The fact of the matter, however, is that one has a dread disease—and a cure has yet to be found for that disease.

Given, however, that so many in our society are afflicted with this disease, two thoughts come to my mind:

- The only solution to the disease is societal system change. In effect, the existing societal system is so wracked by the disease, that the societal system itself has been damaged

beyond repair—and therefore must be replaced with a “newer model” (sorry for lapsing into consumerist language there!).

- That change will not come about via a populist movement because too many in our society are so “hooked” on consumerism that they are unable to perceive their true interests. Given this fact, a vanguard must arise to take the lead with societal system change.

From whence will this vanguard arise? As I have written in several previous essays, I believe that the churches are well positioned to take on this role. Whether they will or not, however, is another matter—and I have serious doubts that the churches will “heed the call.”

Perhaps some of the participants in the current Wall Street protests will come to realize that protesting may make one *feel* good, righteous, or whatever, but that what’s needed at present is *objective* change. Objective change that recognizes that both short-run and long-run change is needed, so that ideas are sought on both fronts, and then implemented.

Regardless of where this vanguard comes from, if our society—if, indeed, the human species—is to be “saved,” that salvation will need to come from a few leaders that emerge. I suspect that such leadership would most likely emerge from somewhere in the United States, but I may be wrong about that. And if that’s the case, I won’t mind one bit!

[October 21, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/restoring-what-is-the-answer/>]

Restoring *What is the Answer?*

Alton C. Thompson

Richard Gwyn, in commenting (“[OWS ‘Angry Mob’ Suddenly Respectable](#)”) on the Occupy Wall Street protestors in New York City has stated:

“If the protestors haven’t yet come up with any credible cures, they have [at least] diagnosed exactly the nature of the problem itself. It’s not a matter of some brave new economic or financial policy [that’s needed]. Instead, it’s a matter of reverting to something very old-fashioned: morality.”

Yes, it’s true that in New York City’s Zuccotti Park, “an extraordinary exercise in self-government is taking place. Food, toilets, medical care, books and magazines to read, tents, warm clothing, have all somehow been organized for a gathering of people almost all of them strangers to each other.” So that the protesters are demonstrating the “old-fashioned morality” that Gwyn advocates—and that most of us admire.

But asserting that it would be “nice” if the Wall Street scoundrels should adopt “old-fashioned morality” is one thing; getting them to *do* so is quite another.

It’s certainly true that “good old-fashioned” greed can be attributed to these (legal) criminals. But who made their criminality legal? Was it not, e.g., the [Financial Services Modernization Act](#) of 1999 (note its misleading title!) that made their heinous acts legal—acts that have had a devastating effect on the lives of millions in this country? And was this Act not passed by our elected “representatives” in Congress? And did they not vote for this act because their constituents demanded it; or, if not, because these politicians knew that passing it would serve the common good? Well, at least the answer to the last question is “No!” For it is becoming ever more evident that our “representatives”—too many of them, at any rate—are “bought and paid for” by the corporate/wealthy elite.

One can, though, argue that that the Wall Street banksters *et al.* are simply doing their job within the legal constraints that exist in our society. So that the fact that their actions are having disastrous effects suggests, at a superficial level, that what’s needed is changes in those legal constraints. But because the “relaxation” of legal constraints that has occurred in the past occurred, not because our “representatives” made a carefully-considered calculation that the common good would thereby be served, but because those “representatives” were acting on the behalf of the corporate/wealthy elite, it’s evident that *it’s the very existence of that elite* that is at the root of our economic problems (and the other problems that have their basis in our economic problems).

Put another way, we have a *structural* problem, not a *moral* problem *per se*. Which is *not* to say, however, that we don't also have a moral problem. My point here, however, is that the two problems are *related*. It is *because* our society has become so *inegalitarian* (a *structural* matter)—for whatever reasons—that we have a *moral* problem. That is, the *very existence* of an inegalitarian situation promotes immoral (if not illegal—because the elite *makes* the immoral legal!) behavior by those at the top. Granted that it was immoral behavior that contributed to the inegalitarian situation in the first place, but once that situation comes into existence, the *situation itself* becomes a causal factor.

To clarify the point that I am trying to make here, it may be useful to take a brief excursion into the past:

All of us living today are descendants of people, living thousands of years ago, who lived in groups. Groups, I need to add, within which moral (e.g., cooperative) behavior was the norm—for the simple reason that it was only such groups that conferred a survival advantage on their members. Most of the members of such groups likely had a biologically-based proclivity for moral behavior, but some may not have had one. However, if one lacked such a “natural” proclivity, one would need to “fake it,” else one ran the risk of being expelled from the group.

If most of those living in groups in the distant past had a “natural” tendency to engage in moral behavior, two corollaries of that tendency were that (a) the groups involved tended to be small in size (i.e., just a few dozen members), and tended to stay small; and (b) those groups tended to be egalitarian. If there was an inequality in influence, this inequality was age-related in that influence tended to increase with age. *That* fact meant that *everyone* was likely to become an “influential” at some point in life.

If the biology of our ancestors tended to produce moral behavior *and* certain “societal” characteristics, it's also true that those societal characteristics tended to promote moral behavior: As one developed from infancy, one *learned*—through observation and precept—to be moral; and one found, upon reaching adulthood, that unless one *was* moral in one's behavior, one was not welcome in the group. (Would that that were true today with our Wall Street thugs!)

It is not quite accurate to state that our ancestors became “programmed” to be moral, and that because our biology today is virtually the same as that of our ancestors, we moderns are also so programmed. However, such an assertion *does* contain a great deal of truth. But *societal* changes that have occurred over the centuries—most of them of an unplanned nature—have resulted in increased inequality.

The significance of the development of inequality in a society is that once it develops, other developments occur—almost “magically,” it seems—that tend to *keep* it that way—perhaps even *intensifying* the degree of inequality. And as this inequality develops, those in “higher” positions find that they are able to exploit those “below” them—without even being conscious of so doing; that is, they find it “natural” to engage in immoral behavior relative to “lowers.”

Exploitative behavior relative to “lowers” not only reduces the well-being of “lowers,” but induces pathologies in them as well—some of those pathologies resulting, in turn, in deviant behaviors. Of course, given the existence of elite control, the immoral actions of members of the elite do not gain the label “immoral”—and are even made legal—and only the deviant actions of “lowers” become “officially” labeled as both “immoral” and (often) “illegal.”

It’s true that a societal system can become so rigid in its inegalitarian nature that that rigidity eventuates in its demise. But in this [Brave New World](#) that we live in currently of diversions, propaganda, advertisements, etc., the discontent generated by the system does not necessarily lead to *rebellion*. It may lead to protests—even widespread protests; but is unlikely to lead to revolutionary change.

Which is just as well. For although we will not get moral behavior from the Wall Street gang members by preaching at them, and will only get moral behavior as a result of societal system change (with the New Society not likely to *have* a Wall Street!), we will get that moral behavior only via *peaceful* change in the nature of our society.

Which is not to say, however, that the transition to a New Society *will* be peaceful. For as those involved in peaceful measures to bring about societal system change are engaged in their efforts, and (or if) members of the elite become aware of those efforts, they may do their best to squelch those change efforts—including the use of violence to do so. For what parasite wants to see its host disappear?!

[October 22, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/the-need-for-change/>]

The Need for Change

Alton C. Thompson

Well-known Slovenian intellectual [Slavoj Žižek](#), speaking recently to Occupy Wall Street protesters, [stated](#):

Our basic message is: the taboo is broken, we do not live in the best possible world, we are allowed and obliged even to think about alternatives. There is a long road ahead, and soon we will have to address the truly difficult questions—questions not about what we do not want, but about what we DO want. What social organization can replace the existing capitalism? What type of new leaders we need? The XXth century alternatives obviously did not work.

His reference here to a “replacement” for our current “social organization” suggests at least three questions:

- Is such a “replacement *really* necessary? Isn’t it possible—and advisable—rather, to try to “fix” the existing “social organization” instead?
- Assuming that the existing “social organization” *does*, in fact, need to be “replaced,” what should be the “shape” and “features” of the “new model”?
- By what *means* should be New Order be realized—brought into being?

Let me, then, address each of these questions in turn:

Is a Replacement Necessary?

One argument that could be used here in answering this question in the affirmative is that our society is currently highly inegalitarian, and *that* fact has been related to many of our problems (by, e.g., Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, [The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger](#), 2009). Therefore, given *societal structure* as a causal factor that explains the existence and magnitude of many of our problems, the “obvious” answer to those problems is *societal* change—in the direction of greater equality of condition.

I have no problem with such an argument (except that to find a *correlation* between two variables is not necessarily to “explain” the one on the basis of the other—i.e., to find a causal connection between the two variables). I believe, however, that there is a stronger argument, one based on the fact that societies are systems:

Societies are *systems*. As such, they not only consist of *sectors*, but those sectors are *inter-related*. At a *given* point in time, however, one of those sectors tends to be dominant relative to the other sectors, meaning that the “other” sectors *serve* the dominant one. Those in the subservient sectors may not be aware that their sector is a subservient one; and, on the other hand, those in the dominant sector do not necessarily *consciously* impose themselves upon the subservient sectors. Typically, there is a lack of such awareness both on the part of those in the dominant sector and those in the other sectors—which fact contributes to the “working” of the system, the fact that it functions, and *continues* to function, in an almost machine-like fashion.

At times some sand gets into the gears of this machine, but this is more likely to occur by accident rather than conscious design. However, consciousness tends to be more present among those in the dominant sector than those in the other ones, so that members of the dominant sector often are *deliberate* in their efforts to shape one or more of the subservient sectors. Some of those in subservient sectors (e.g., some in academia and in journalism) may become aware of the fact that they are in a subservient sector, and may object to that position; however, such individuals tend to be “voices crying in the wilderness” in that they are paid little heed. And, of course, there are those many prostitutes in the intellectual class who glory in being lackeys who serve the interests of the dominant class (see, e.g., [this](#)).

Although the analogy between a societal system and a machine has a great deal of merit, a societal system differs from a machine in that it *changes over time* (in response to technological and intellectual changes?). That is, the *nature* of the sectors changes over time, as does the nature of the dominant sector. Regarding the latter point, it is of interest that for the past several centuries the Economy has been the dominant sector, but that over time the dominance by commerce gave way to one by manufacturing industry, with financial “services” currently the dominant sector. Meaning that the other sectors now existing—education, religion, law, medicine, journalism, entertainment, government, etc.—all serve that dominant sector.

Not only has the “sector set” and the nature of the dominant sector changed over time. Increasingly has a small group of individuals and firms come to gain dominance *within* the dominant sector. Thus, a small group of individuals/firms has been able to gain undue influence over not only the economy, but the society at large, and has—unsurprisingly—pursued its narrow objectives without concern for the impact on the “99%.”

The power that this small group has been able to gain over the societal system is such that conventional approaches to effectuating societal change—e.g., “throw the rascals out, and vote new politicians into office”—have become increasingly irrelevant. For example, given that the elite can spend huge amounts on “their” candidates, so that those candidates have the best chance of being elected; and then spends huge amounts lobbying “their” “representatives” and other representatives; and that the U. S. Supreme Court is dominated by “their” people; given all of this, it is foolish to think that the “old ways” of fixing things have any relevance any more. It is becoming increasingly obvious that the only solution to our society’s problems lies in *societal*

system change. This, then, suggests two questions: (a) What should be the “look” of the New Society, and (b) By what means should it be brought into being?

The “New Model”: What “Features”?

In my e-book [*What Are Churches For?*](#) I present (Chapters 3 and 4) ideas for goals to achieve, assuming the creation of a New Society, discuss (Chapter 6) the possible “shape” of such a society (i.e., one of cooperative eco-communities, CECs), and even discuss “getting there” (Chapters 7 and 8). Since writing that e-book, however, I have become increasingly willing to view most of that material as “talking points” rather than firm suggestions. Increasingly, I have been willing to state but one goal for the New Society—that those creating it strive to make it a “family of families.”

I realize that this is a vague goal—but that’s just the point. Increasingly, I have become less confident in *my* ability to dictate the nature of the Good Society and have gained confidence in *others’* ability to design their portion of the Good Society. In fact, I have come to the conclusion that the Good Society will *not* be achieved by having some experts create a design and then implement it, but will only be achieved by prospective members of that New Society playing an *active* role in its design and creation. And it is here where my principal suggestion enters the picture—that people use the Structured Interaction Group (SIG) discussed in Chapter 8 of my e-book as their “planning tool.”

The Means

I have already stating the means for ushering in the New Society: Create SIGS and use them as the vehicle for developing plans (for the members of the particular SIG), and for then implementing those plans.

As I have nothing to add regarding SIGs beyond what I wrote in Chapter 8 of my e-book, I’ll just shut up and sit down now, if you don’t mind!

[October 23, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/home-of-the-brave-or-of-fools/>]

Home of the Brave . . . or of Fools?

Alton C. Thompson

If one believes that the United States is one of the greatest forces for “good” in this world, this is only because one has not read, e.g., any of [William Blum’s](#) writings. For in his most recent (October 4, 2011) “[Anti-Empire Report](#)” he notes—just regarding the Middle East, mind you!—that “our” country was involved in:

- the shooting down of two Libyan planes in 1981
- the bombing of Lebanon in 1983 and 1984
- the bombing of Libya in 1986
- the bombing and sinking of an Iranian ship in 1987
- the shooting down of an Iranian passenger plane in 1988
- the shooting down of two more Libyan planes in 1989
- the massive bombing of the Iraqi people in 1991
- the continuing bombings and draconian sanctions against Iraq for the next 12 years
- the bombing of Afghanistan and Sudan in 1998
- the habitual support of Israel despite the routine devastation and torture it inflicts upon the Palestinian people
- the habitual condemnation of Palestinian resistance to this
- the abduction of "suspected terrorists" from Muslim countries, such as Malaysia, Pakistan, Lebanon and Albania, who were then taken to places like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, where they were tortured
- the large military and hi-tech presence in Islam's holiest land, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere in the Persian Gulf region
- the support of numerous undemocratic, authoritarian Middle East governments from the Shah of Iran to Mubarak of Egypt to the Saudi royal family
- the invasion, bombing and occupation of Afghanistan, 2001 to the present, and Iraq, 2003 to the present
- the bombings and continuous firing of missiles to assassinate individuals in Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan, and Libya during the period of 2006-2011

For a country so obsessed with “terrorism” allegedly perpetrated by others, it’s time for “our” leaders to look in the mirror, so they can see themselves for what they are—the primary *perpetrators* of terrorism in the world. Now if a country is a perpetrator of the various acts that constitute “terrorism,” one should not be surprised if those actions result in “[blowback](#)”—a term

associated with [Chalmers Johnson](#). And although the 9/11 “attack” is often cited as an example of blowback, questions remain as to whether this wasn’t actually just an *apparent* attack, and was in actuality a “false flag” operation, with the buildings brought down with explosives, the aircraft simply being a decoy.

Why has the United States become a country more known for its military “adventurism” than anything else? Why does the United States spend \$2,100,000 [each minute](#) (!!!) on its military?—in the process wasting much of that money.[1] Is it because of powerful enemies “out there” that we must defend ourselves against, or for other reasons? For sure, we have enemies; but why should *that* be surprising given that our foreign policy seems to be *calculated* with the express purpose of *making* enemies!

But *could* we be so irrational that we *deliberately* seek enemies? We can’t be *that* irrational, can we? Well, yes we are!—but not when it dawns on us that “we” is not the appropriate word to use here. For those who are *promoting* our militaristic posture do not suffer from any of the “blowback” that results from “our” military adventurism. They are promoting it for *their* reasons—reasons that have nothing to do with the defense of the United States.

They are promoting it because they have nothing to lose (seemingly) in doing so, and much to gain: The “service” men and women who fall in battle are not *their* children, and the gains they get from this adventurism are significant:

- Military—officers in particular—are given a chance to rise in rank, and thereby in salary; and after leaving the military—while still young—may be able to obtain high-paying jobs in the private sector (e.g., as lobbyists—with “expertise” gained at public expense).
- Manufacturers in the private sector make millions providing supplies of various sorts to the military. Once this process begins with a given supplier, *its* interest is, of course, to *continue* the relationship, so that, e.g., innovations that it develops with its product(s) become a rationale for its continuing as a supplier.
- Members of the elite not directly connected to the military benefit from the fact that wars are *diversionary*; as George Orwell put it (in [1984](#)), “war is peace.” Ironically, wars protect the elite from notice and criticism not only because of the fact that they are diversionary, but because many “lowers” unconsciously *compensate* for their low position by becoming super patriots. As such, these people become valuable allies of the elite—without becoming aware of the fact that they are acting against their interests in so doing. People join, e.g., the Tea Party believing that it is a populist organization that will further their interests, not realizing that it receives much of its funding from the [Koch brothers](#)—i.e., individuals who are anything but populist!

As [Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett](#) pointed out recently, the more unequal a society becomes, the more problems it tends to have—the implication being that there is a causal

relationship between these two variables. I have no doubt that there *is* such a relationship, but would add that the relationship is a complex one. And, I would add that one reason why our society has *become* so inequalitarian is that the elite has pushed militarism, knowing that doing so would advance their interests while simultaneously protecting it from undue notice.

Given that the elite has gained such a stranglehold on this society, it is foolish to think that change—in a more positive direction—can be achieved via conventional means. Those who are enthusiasts for the military insist—in their propaganda, at least—that our safety as a people depends on a huge military budget—a budget that accounts for about [60% of the total](#)!! (Our country spends more on *its* military than all other countries in the world *combined* spend on *their* militaries! Talk about pathetic facts!) And although this claim is *worse* than nonsense, many in our society are too ill-informed to realize that fact; and those in that group who have become super patriots—not realizing where their true interests lie—will “jump” on those who dare to state otherwise—both verbally and physically.

It should be clear that our society’s problems will be solved only via societal system change—and that those involved in bringing about that change need to proceed with *care*; need to try to work “under the radar” as much as possible. For if they don’t, their efforts may be squelched before they can even get solidly underway; and if *that* happens, global warming will “do us humans in” for sure.

Note

1. “As much as \$60 billion in U.S. funds has been lost to waste and fraud in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past decade through lax oversight of contractors, poor planning and payoffs to warlords and insurgents, an independent panel investigating U.S. wartime spending estimates.” This per the [Associated Press](#).

[October 25, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/a-bouquet-of-flowers/>]

A Bouquet of Flowers[1]

Alton C. Thompson

Is there anything more beautiful than a bouquet of flowers? And although even a bouquet consisting of just *one* type of flower—e.g., roses—is beautiful, the most beautiful bouquet is one that consists of a *variety* of flowers. Flowers that vary in color, in design, in shape, in size, etc.

So it is with *human* communities—or, should I say, so *should* it be with human communities. For insofar as *most* of our communities resemble bouquets, they are bouquets that have not been nourished with water and plant food; rather, they are bouquets that are wilted, brown in color, distorted in shape—downright ugly, in short.

Must this be so? It is easy for us today to harbor a feeling of resignation, to say to ourselves, “I am just one person among 7 billion on this globe, what difference can *I* possibly make?” And the institutions of our society do little to help us overcome this feeling of powerlessness. One might think that the churches would be the one institution in our societies that would be playing a leadership role in helping us overcome this feeling. But as I noted in another [essay](#), societies are *systems*, with the parts constituting a given such system working together to *maintain* the system—this including churches.

Those associated with a given part do not necessarily *try* to make their part a “good” system part; but it turns out that their actions *do* precisely that. *Why* systems operate that way is a mystery that I’ll likely never understand. But my intellect tells me that that’s just how systems “operate.”

But don’t we humans, given that we have the ability to *see* this about systems, also have the ability to *falsify* this truth about systems? Surely we can recognize that the world we live in is far from perfect, so that we can easily reach the conclusion that societal system change is *necessary*. Why, then, can’t we *act* on that recognition?

I suspect that the reason for this failure to act is the *feeling*, shared by so many, that the problems that we face are of such a magnitude that the actions of *one* person are of no significance—so there’s no point in doing *anything*.

The question that arises is: Given that the Economy is currently the dominant sector of our society, and that all other sectors are subservient to that sector, is there any possibility that *one*—just one—of those subservient sectors *could* be “converted” from its subservient role?

In my earlier essay (cited above) I identified the major “other” sectors of our society as “education, religion, law, medicine, journalism, entertainment, government, etc.” Do any of

these possibly qualify? As I stated above, one would like to think that the churches would see this as their role—but they haven’t, with some of them having even becoming cheerleaders for the Existing Order and its dominant sector!

What about the education sector, then? While it’s true that some scholars in the past were not bashful about dealing with values (e.g., E. A. Ross, [*Sin and Society*](#), 1907), “objectivity” has become the order of the day. So that although some scholars have not been cowed by that god, and have attempted to be both partial *and* objective (while carefully separating the two), most scholars have followed the path of objectivity—and irrelevance, triviality.

Should we then look to journalism? Here, the problem is that *all* of the major news outlets have sold their souls to the corporate elite, so that the average person is fed a daily dosage of propaganda, and is not even aware of being manipulated. Fortunately, there are periodicals that continue to carry the torch, but their readership is small; and there are web sites such as this one on which people can which people can “speak their minds.” And although their readership may be small, the fact that they are all accessible—for free—from any computer in the world means that such sites have tremendous potential for good. Thus, those media provide with some measure of hope.

The law and medicine sectors can be dismissed out of hand, because their focus is too narrow, but what about government? We Americans are privileged to have the vote, but the practice of [gerrymandering](#) goes back to our early history; although the franchise was originally restricted to just a few, it was expanded over time, but now faces constriction; our Supreme Court has come under the control of the Far Right, and has made legal the corruption of our politics; money has come to determine who gets elected, and what becomes law (because of lobbying efforts); etc. In short, money has come to so dominate our politics that having the right to vote has become virtually meaningless.

This leaves us with but one sector, the entertainment sector. And although when I began this essay, I had no idea that I would be concluding that our “salvation” lies with the entertainment industry, I am forced to conclude that I see no other alternative. Not that I would look to television for salvation, for although I remember the 1960s as a period of many fine dramas, long ago television became a vast wasteland—as a little fish named [Newton N. Minow](#) put it.

Movies are another matter, however. It’s true that most movies are garbage, but movies have the capability of moving one deeply—as I have noted in two previous essays ([this](#) and [this](#)) on [Khan](#). Last week, our younger daughter (who’s still living with us as she completes a phlebotomy program) wanted us to see [Dolphin’s Tale](#), so the three of us went—and we all enjoyed the movie. (Our younger daughter has been an animal lover for as long as I can remember—and we have done nothing to discourage such an orientation.)

Many great movies have been produced over the years, and there's no reason why more can't be produced in the future—movies that would be so powerful that they would provide a real impetus in changing this world from an ugly place to a beautiful bouquet of flowers.

My challenge, then, to you as a reader: If you have any talent in this area, or if you have any contacts in the movie industry, *please* let them know of their potential for making this beautiful bouquet. If they would get the ball rolling and, in the process, make an effort to shame the churches into finally doing what they should have been doing for the past 2000 years (!), that ball may gain enough momentum as to be unstoppable.

May it be so!

Note

1. Inspired by Jean Vanier's "[Seeing God In Others](#)," a talk broadcast in 1995.

[October 26, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/silas-marner-out-east/>]

Silas Marner Out East

Alton C. Thompson

Recently I felt an urge to read *Silas Marner*. I may have read the book around 55 years ago—for, after all, it's a novel that is commonly assigned in high school. But if I did read it then, I have no recollection of having read it. However, I have answered the urge that I had recently, and recently completed the reading of the book. At the time when I experienced the urge to read the book, I didn't know the basis of the urge. Now, however, I believe that I know that basis—and use this essay to identify it.

Marner is a difficult book to read, because it contains so much obsolete language, and so much of its conversation and action is seemingly irrelevant—just “fill”: While reading the book, one quickly gains the sense that “[George](#)” [Eliot's](#) message would have been better conveyed in a short story rather than a novel. For one does not reach the “heart” of her story until one has passed the half way point of the novel.

For those who have not read the book, the story centers on Silas Marner, a man from “Lantern Yard” up north some place in England, who is (falsely) accused of a theft, and therefore forced to move to a different location. He travels south to “Raveloe,” where he establishes himself as a weaver—a weaver who is also a recluse, thus regarded (understandably) as odd by his neighbors.

Given that Marner minimized his contact with his neighbors, his only source of happiness was the money that he accumulated, and every evening he fondled his gold pieces. Until, that is, someone entered his hovel while he was away, and stole his money. This loss was, of course, devastating to Marner, but one evening his gold seemingly returned, as if by magic:

Turning towards the hearth, where the two logs had fallen apart, and sent forth only a red uncertain glimmer, he [i.e., Silas] seated himself on his fireside chair, and was stooping to push his logs together, when, to his blurred vision, it seemed as if there were gold on the floor in front of the hearth. Gold!—his own gold—brought back to him as mysteriously as it had been taken away! He felt his heart begin to beat violently, and for a few moments he was unable to stretch out his hand and grasp the restored treasure. The heap of gold seemed to glow and get larger beneath his agitated gaze. He leaned forward at last, and stretched forth his hand; but instead of the hard coin with the familiar resisting outline, his fingers encountered soft warm curls. In utter amazement, Silas fell on his knees and bent his head low to examine the marvel: it was a sleeping child—a round, fair thing, with soft yellow rings all over its head.[1]

Once Marner discerned that the gold in front of him was a child, not the gold coins that had been stolen, his first thought was:

Could this be his little sister come back to him in a dream—his little sister whom he had carried about in his arms for a year before she died, when he was a small boy without shoes or stockings? That was the first thought that darted across Silas's blank wonderment. *Was* it a dream? He rose to his feet again, pushed his logs together, and, throwing on some dried leaves and sticks, raised a flame; but the flame did not disperse the vision—it only lit up more distinctly the little round form of the child, and its shabby clothing. It was very much like his little sister.[2]

Marner's sister—who had died as a child—had been named Hephzibah,[3] as had his mother. And because his sister had been called “Eppie,” Marner decided to give the little girl who had entered his dwelling the name “Eppie” as well. Why did he insist on keeping her, given that he was a bachelor? It may have been memories of past happy times suddenly came to the fore in his unconscious mind, virtually forcing him to do so. But whatever his motive, he *did* insist that the child was now *his*—after all, the child had come to *him*—and he proceeded to raise the child (with, however, the help of Dolly Winthrop).

This experience of raising Eppie was a transformative one for Marner:

As the child's [i.e., Eppie's] mind was growing into knowledge, his [i.e., Silas's] mind was growing into memory: as her life unfolded, his soul, long stupefied in a cold, narrow prison, was unfolding, too, and trembling gradually into full consciousness.[4]

And as Marner began to change, so did the quality of his relationship with his neighbors—and beyond:

No child was afraid of approaching Silas when Eppie was near him: there was no repulsion around him now, either for young or old; for the little child had come to link him once more with the whole world. There was love between him and the child that blent them into one, and there was love between the child and the world—from men and women with parental looks and tones, to the red lady-birds and the round pebbles.[5]

Also undergoing change was Marner's relationship with money:

The disposition to hoard [that Silas had once had] had been utterly crushed at the very first by the loss of his long-stored gold: the coins he earned afterwards seemed as irrelevant as stones brought to complete a house suddenly buried by an earthquake; the sense of bereavement was too heavy upon him for the old thrill of satisfaction to arise again at the touch of the newly-earned coin. And now something [i.e., Eppie] had come to replace his hoard which gave a growing purpose to the earnings, drawing his hope and joy continually toward beyond the money.[6]

This story of Silas Marner is, of course, “just” a story, but does it not ring true? Given that we humans evolved as members of groups, does it not follow that we became “designed” for group living, and that if human individuals are isolated—whether by choice, circumstance, or punishment (“solitary confinement”)—their personalities will become distorted? Temporarily, at least—as Eliot's novel suggests.

Which brings me to the “out east” portion of my essay. For as I was reading *Silas Marner*, it occurred to me that that novel can be perceived as a parable about the present—with the Wizards of Wall Street representing Silas Marner. Which suggests two things:

- Their heinous actions recently may reflect their lack of integration into our society—they are so lacking in human contact that they no longer have consciences. Not that other factors can’t have the same effect—such as becoming “possessed” by an ideology, such as the “free markets” one. But I suspect that the dominant factor in the case of the Wall Street Monsters may be the former factor.
- They are not beyond redemption.

Now if both of these conclusions are “on the mark,” what sort of solution can be offered? The “eppie-phenomenon” solution is, of course, out of the question, but is there a broader solution anyway?—one that would have applicability beyond Wall Street.

The answer that I would give is that despite the virtues of the *family* as an institution, it is time to recognize that that institution has severe limitations. In making that assertion I am *not* suggesting that the family be *abandoned*; rather, I am suggesting that it be *strengthened* by making it a part of a larger psycho-sociological unit—let us call it a *community*.

The word “community” usually conjures up an image of a unit that has a *geographical* expression—a unit, in fact, that is *primarily* thought of simply in geographical terms. However, in this age of instant communication with others at virtually any point in the world—via e-mail, facebook, etc.—the old geographical notion of “community” is (largely) *passé*. The concept of “community” that has particular relevance at present is one whose focus is on *interaction*, but not *just* interaction. Rather, it is interaction based on concern for the psychological health of the other, and a feeling of responsibility for those with whom one interacts—responsibility, indeed, *beyond* the boundaries of one’s “interaction network.” Those responsibilities may even be given a *contractual* status, analogous to a marriage contract.

The above presents some abstract ideas—ideas in need of being “fleshed out,” of course. I will leave it to others, however, to take on that difficult task—and I hope that at least some readers will agree with me on this need, and begin to develop ideas regarding how to “operationalize” them.

Were this to occur, with the ideas developed then implemented, I’m convinced that many of the problems that we have currently would gradually melt away. Once such ideas are developed, no one would be *forced* to adopt them, of course; and there might be resistance to such a “radical” idea—coming from, e.g., “religious” leaders. But *some*, I’m convinced, *would* find this idea attractive, and would embrace it. And as the [diffusion of innovation theory](#) suggests, once some begin to embrace the idea, it is likely to spread in a patterned way until it engulfs virtually everyone. I look forward to that day!

Notes

1. George Eliot, [*Silas Marner: The Weaver of Reveloe*](#). Edited and with Notes by David Carroll. London: Penguin Books, 2010, p. 110. First published in 1861. “George Eliot” was the pen name of Mary Anne Evans [1819 – 1880].
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 110 – 111.
3. Here’s an [interesting statement](#) of possible relevance: “In Hebrew, the name Hephzibah means ‘my delight is in her.’ A reference to Hephzibah in *Isaiah* 62:4 says, ‘Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate: but thou shalt be called Hephzibah, and thy land Beulah [meaning “married”]: for the Lord delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married.’” It seems probably that Eliot, in choosing the name “Hephzibah,” was alluding to this passage in *Isaiah*.
4. *Op. cit.*, p. 126.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

[October 27, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/how-i-perceive-the-tea-party-movement/>]

How I Perceive the Tea Party Movement

Alton C. Thompson

My (short) answer is that I perceive it as a movement that has involved triple betrayal. However, I'm getting ahead of myself here!

Today's Tea Party movement takes its name from the famous Boston "[tea party](#)" of 1773—during which colonists, "disguised" as Indians (i.e., Native Americans), boarded some English ships in the Boston Harbor, and proceeded to dump tea into the harbor as a protest against the [Tea Act](#) passed earlier in 1773 by the British Parliament.

According to [one web site](#) that claims to speak for today's Tea Party Movement, members of the movement are "patriots" (implying that those who are *not* a part of the movement are *not* patriots), with the basis of the movement being that certain principles associated with "patriotism" are currently being violated flagrantly. Those principles: (a) fiscal responsibility, (b) limited government, and (c) free markets. Thus, the avowed purpose of the Tea Party movement is one of *restoration*.

Whether or not "Tea Partiers" should be taken seriously as people whose primary orientation is to principles—namely, the three principles just listed—a recently-published [study](#) by David E. Campbell (of Notre Dame University) and Robert D. Putnam (of Harvard University)[1] has concluded—surprisingly—that (a) Tea Partiers are currently *less* popular in this country than atheists and Muslims (!), and (b) that those who have joined this movement—although a varied group—tend to have the following characteristics:

- White in "race."
- Had been "highly partisan Republicans long before the Tea Party was born"
- Have, and have had, "a low regard for immigrants and blacks long before Barack Obama . . . [became] president"
- Have been "social conservatives"—e.g., have been opponents of abortion.
- They "seek 'deeply religious' elected officials, approve of religious leaders' engaging in politics[,] and want religion brought into political debates." Although their leaders "say their overriding concern is smaller government," the rank and file "are more concerned about putting God in government."

In their interest in “putting God in government,” Tea Partiers tend to be “Christians,” and ones of an “[evangelical](#)” or “[conservative](#)” persuasion.

Although no Tea Partier has stated as much (so far as I know), I would impute the following “philosophical” ideas to Tea Partiers in our society (but not *just* them):[2]

- People live in societies, not as isolates.
- Societies are always inegalitarian—primarily because people vary in their innate abilities.
- Although societies are always inegalitarian, they are not necessarily *rigidly* so (because based on heredity). Societies *can* be inegalitarian—and *meritocratic*; indeed, a meritocratic society is (potentially) the *best* type of society.
- However, for a society to achieve that potential:
 - The society itself must, through certain institutions, ensure that each member’s innate abilities are developed to the maximum degree possible.
 - Once a given societal member is “on his own,” no barriers must exist which prevent that individual from reaching the highest “rung” that his (or her) ability enables him (or her) to reach.
 - Regardless of the position one occupies, one must be as productive and honest as one can be, striving to use one’s abilities in the service of the society. That is, one’s goal is to maximize one’s contribution to the *society*, not personal aggrandizement.
- Despite the latter point, the “higher” the position, the greater the compensation that should be associated with that position. Why? Because that’s what’s “fair.” (Underlying that judgment, however, is the assumption that the more one is compensated, the “better” will one be able to live (i.e., one will be able to have more comfort, will be able to do more, etc.) And underlying *that* assumption, in turn, is that the more one “*earns*,” the more will one *spend* on oneself and one’s family members—with, however, the percent *saved* increasing with increasing income).
- Any society needs certain things (e.g., infrastructure, such as roads) and certain services (e.g., protection—from fires, criminals), and therefore needs a government, with some government employees making *decisions* for the society, other government employees performing necessary *work* for the society. The money to support government employees must come from the citizenry in the form of taxes, following two principles:

- Those who benefit most from something provided by government should pay the most in taxes. For example, trucks should pay more than automobiles, because the former cause more damage to roadways than the latter.
- The higher one's income, the more should one pay in taxes—not only because one is better able to pay more, but because the higher one's income, the more does one tend to benefit *as a citizen of the society*.

I may be accused to putting far too much into the heads of Tea Partiers here than is actually there, but I am willing to give Tea Partiers the benefit of the doubt on this matter. Given that, what I would argue is that although few of them are able to articulate clearly what is bothering them—and that what they *do* articulate does not necessarily reflect what's really on their minds—it is the above “philosophical” ideas that are in their minds, and that form the basis for their expressed views and actions.

As we grow up in this society, we are taught—indirectly, if not directly—not only that a meritocracy is *good*, but that our society *is* one. Put another way, one learns that a certain “social contract” exists in this society, and that the terms of that contract are, in fact, followed by most, if not all, parties in our society.

But although one *learns* these “facts” about our society, one—especially if one occupies one of the bottom rungs on the “ladder of success”—senses that one has learned a lie—this “sensing” occurring especially over the past few decades, as [real incomes](#) have been declining. One senses what might be termed “[cognitive dissonance](#),”—and senses that one has been betrayed by one's society: One feels, e.g., that one is being disrespected, and denied opportunities that others, less deserving, have been provided. One knows that others “out there” are responsible for these facts (while a tendency to blame oneself still lingers, however), but those “others” are anonymous.

In being unable to articulate precisely what the problem(s) is, and who is responsible, one tends to take the easy path in fixing blame—by blaming immigrants, blacks, etc., and perhaps also claiming for oneself special righteousness (in that, e.g., one is against abortion). Although many who feel this way are churchgoers, their pastors are as ill-informed as they are; thus, rather than their pastors helping them understand their situation, those pastors contribute to an *intensification* of their views—and provide a community situation that contributes further to their increased fixations. They *do* identify problems, true, ones that are “obviously” problems—but not the *real* problems. Thus, their second betrayal is at the hand of their “evangelical” pastors.

The Tea Party movement is not without precedent,[3] of course. It is just the most recent movement—but has become more national in scope than many of its predecessors. But despite the fact that the media—should I be “politically correct” here and say Fawning Corporate Media (FCM)?!—makes the Tea Party appear to be an important force in our society currently, the fact of the matter (see the earlier reference to Campbell and Putnam) is that the movement is losing, rather than gaining, support.

Why has this movement arisen—apart from the fact that many of those who are a part of the movement have real grievances (as do most of those who are *not* a part of the movement!)? I would identify two additional factors:

- Some have acquired leadership roles in the movement out of personal *ego* needs; gaining prominence as a leader in the movement helps them compensate for the fact that otherwise they are virtually invisible.
- Rich people such as the [Koch brothers](#) have been helping fund the movement—for two reasons: First, many of the proposals associated with the movement are in the economic interests of the rich, while ostensibly being populist in nature; second, a movement such as the Tea Party movement deflects attention from those who are supporting it financially, and benefiting from it financially.

Thus, betrayal is also involved by the very people who support the movement financially and otherwise!

We live in a complex society, one whose workings are not easy to see or understand. Thus, insofar as those who “pull the strings” in the society do so for their own benefit—and to the detriment of the “99%—those who are hurt have a difficult time identifying, with accuracy, the ultimate causes of their hurt. Because of that difficulty, but the presence of a psychological need, on their part, to arrive at an answer, they settle on answers that seem to have some plausibility, but lack real substance. The real tragedy here is that they settle on answers that contribute little, if anything, to their own (material) well-being. And insofar as they become “locked into” a certain ideology, it becomes difficult for others to help them “see the light”—for they develop suspicion of those who most able to inform them accurately.

Notes

1. Putnam and Campbell are the authors of the recently-published [American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us](#). New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010. While watching the *Rachel Maddow* show last night (October 25, 2011) after completing this essay, I learned that Glenn Greenwald had just published *With Liberty and Justice for Some: How the Law is Used to Destroy Equality and Protect the Powerful* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2011). Greenwald’s discussion of his new book suggests that his thinking along these lines is rather close to mine. See [this](#): “Observers have compared the Tea Party movement to others in U.S. history, finding commonalities with previous populist^[221] or nativist movements and third parties such as the [Know Nothing](#) party, the [John Birch Society](#),^{[221][222]} and the campaigns of [Huey Long](#), [Barry Goldwater](#),^[222] [George Wallace](#),^[223] and [Ross Perot](#).^[224] Two historians, Steve Fraser and Joshua B. Freeman, have written in [Salon.com](#) that the Tea Party movement and anti-immigration movements share a “fear of displacement”.^[223] Historian Jill Lepore has described the movement as a form of “historical fundamentalism”, turning the founding into sacred history and rejecting critical academic study of it.^[225] U.S. Senator [Chris Dodd](#) compared the movement

to the Know Nothings, saying it seeks to roll "the clock back to a point in time which they've sort of idealized in their own minds as being a better time in America".^[226] Other commentators, like [Jacob Heilbrunn](#) and [Michael Lind](#), predict that it will share the short life span of third parties in U.S. history that have faded after altering the political order.^{[227][228][229]}

[October 28, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/personhood-corporate-vs-person/>]

Personhood: Corporate vs. "Person"

Alton C. Thompson

We must level the playing field and return to the balance envisioned by our Founders, in which the highest priority actually accrues to humans and their communities—not to any massive authority, be it government or business.

The first step in getting back to those values will be to end corporate personhood.

The above [excerpt](#) from Thom Hartmann's *Unequal Protection: How Corporations Became 'People' – and How You Can Fight Back* (2010) is from a book whose focus is on "[corporate personhood](#)." Hartmann's thesis is that the U. S. Supreme Court made a huge blunder in "recognizing" corporations as equivalent to human individuals for legal purposes, and Hartmann argues that the evils which this decision (actually, *series* of decisions) has enabled over the years are such that priority (the "first step") should be given to ending corporate personhood.

I agree with Hartmann that the "highest priority" should be given to "humans and their communities," but have two questions:

- Can an undoing of *corporate* personhood be accomplished easily?
- Even were such an undoing to be accomplished—easily or otherwise—would all of our *problems*—as Americans, as humans—then be solved?

Given that the U. S. Supreme Court is currently dominated by a pro-elite element, and the prospects of that changing in the near future are minimal, I fail to foresee any such undoing in the near future. In fact, with [Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission](#) (2010) the U. S. Supreme Court held that corporate funding of independent political broadcasts in candidate elections cannot be limited under the [First Amendment](#) of the Constitution, thereby overruling *Austin* (1990) and partly overruling *McConnell* (2003). In making that ruling, the U. S. Supreme Court virtually guaranteed that the elite would gain *further* control over our society, thereby making change in the direction desired by Hartmann virtually impossible in the near future.

But even were an undoing to occur within this decade, I see no reason to expect that the *direction* that our society is headed would be changed significantly. Given that societies are *systems*—with our society being no exception—the forces that work to maintain our society as a system would continue in operation. And although those forces will work not only to *maintain* the

system but to *change* it according to its own logic (which logic is poorly understood, I will grant), the changes that will occur “naturally” do not bode well for either the American people or for the human species.

What I especially fear is that—given that members of “our” elite seemingly live in a cocoon—the elite will continue to make our society ever more inegalitarian, to the point that violence will erupt on a widespread basis, and that that violence will set the stage for the society becoming more fascist than it already is—with a Hitlerian figure arising to “save” us. Once that occurs, we can look forward to a long period of oppressive rule, during which the concept of “rights” will become virtually obsolete. And not only that: Rather than taking the prospect of ecocatastrophe resulting from global warming seriously, that problem, rather than being addressed, will be allowed to simply increase in severity.

What’s needed today is efforts to resist the forces that are “naturally” working to keep the societal system operating and changing-while-operating, that resistance taking the form of creating a New Society within the shell of the Existing Order. Which raises the question: Where to begin? What is the first step to take?—if it is something other than working to end corporate personhood.

In answering this question, let me begin by taking you back 41 years to an unusual experience that I had. At the time, I was ending my (short) career in academia, and was teaching a summer course. The experience may have been brought on by my bodily system as a coping mechanism (thereby acting in my interests, with my consciousness playing no role), given that I was in a stressful situation (in that my life would be soon changing), but the fact of the matter is that I simply *don’t know* what brought on the experience, and tend to think that there was more to the experience than just coping.

In *labeling* the experience, the term “natural high” comes to my mind. I suppose that a “natural high” is somehow analogous to a *drug* “high,” but never having had the latter, I’m not in a position to make such an analogy. But in referring to the experience as a “natural high,” I would identify two features in particular as being associated with that “high”:

- I had the *feeling* that I could “handle” anything that came my way: No “bad news” would be so “bad” that I wouldn’t be able to react to it in a rational, constructive way. What I find most interesting about this feeling is that it was of a *passive* nature. That is, rather than feeling that I could *do* anything that I set my mind to doing, I felt that I could *react* well to any “bad” news that I received—whether regarding me, a relative, a friend, or anyone else.

- I *perceived* the people with whom I had contact—including the students in the course—as *individuals*, but as individuals who differed from other individuals only in *kind*. That is, I perceived individuals as *unique*—and thereby of *equal* importance. Usually, we are in the habit of differentiating one person from another in *quantitative* terms (e.g., she is prettier than that other girl, he is richer than that other man), but as if by magic, I was unable so to differentiate one person from another. I remember, for example, talking to one young woman in the class, who mentioned the possibility of running for a local political office, and I encouraged her to do so. She stated, however, that she felt like a “freak” because of being unusually tall for a girl. Until she said that, I had simply not *noticed* that she was taller than most females. And I made an attempt to assure her that she was by no means a “freak,” and should consider the possibility of running for office seriously.

As I have tried to make sense of that experience since 1970, the first thing that came to mind was Paul’s references, in his letters, to being “Spirit-filled.” For example, in Galatians 5:22 he stated that if one is filled with the Holy Spirit, one will experience love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and faithfulness. As what *I* had experienced had some relationship with what was on Paul’s list (which, however, made no explicit reference to *perceptions*), it occurred to me that *possibly* I had been Spirit-filled during that period—a period that lasted for over three months, then began to fade, as I came back to “Reality.”

But whether that experience was, or was not, one of “Spirit-filling,” I long ago concluded that the experience that I had was a *desirable* one; so that given that, the question arose: Is there something that can be done to *induce* such a feeling in people, a “something” that would involve other than drug-taking? What I concluded regarding this is that *discussion groups* might be the answer. Thus, I did some reading on “[circling](#)” and arrived at my own views on the matter, described in Chapter 8 of my e-book [What Are Churches For?](#) I have made some effort to introduce the institution therein described—the Structured Interaction Group (SIG)—in the Presbyterian church that I attend, but have learned to be patient in doing so.

Others who are better “situated,” however, may be in a better position to proceed with initiating SIGs immediately, and I urge others to do so. Why? Because I believe that important ideas relative to societal system change can emerge from SIG sessions, and then get acted upon. If this occurs, I am confident that our slide into fascism can be “nipped in the bud.” Eliminating *corporate* personhood would, I agree, be a “plus,” but developing *person* personhood (via the SIG) has even *more* potential for good!

[October 28, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/is-there-a-need-for-a-supranational-authority/>]

Is There a Need for a “Supranational Authority”?

Alton C. Thompson

The Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace has just issued a document with the imposing title *Towards Reforming the International Financial and Monetary Systems in the Context of Global Political Authority*. Marquette University (Milwaukee, Wisconsin) theologian Daniel C. Maguire has [stated](#), regarding the document:

This document is true to that Jesus mission. Nowhere did Jesus say, “by this shall people know you are my disciples, that you do not contracept!” No he said, if you love justice and peace as I do, if you are good news to the poor as I am, “then all will know that you are my disciples” (John 13:35). This document is good news for the poor and bad news for the Tea Party.

It says we need globalized solutions for globalized problems; it favors a market economy but not this one; it calls for “supranational authority,” a healthy, non-tyrannical “world political authority” to tame the greed games that strip the poor and gorge the rich; it calls names, deriding “neoliberalism,” the Neocons’ Credo, as devoid of “moral perspective” and a writ for “collective greed.” It seeks to tax financial transactions to create a “world reserve fund.” Yes! Tax!

Whereas this new document takes some ideas expressed by Jesus 2,000 years ago and “operationalizes” them in a manner seemingly appropriate for today, one wonders how *realistic* it is to propose a “healthy, non-tyrannical ‘world political authority’ to tame the greed games that strip the poor and gorge the rich . . .” The basis for my concern here is that although the Founding Fathers of the United States were intent on controlling the abuses of power, and strove to do so by creating a government that involved “checks and balances,” this *institutional* solution—I should say, this *particular* institutional solution—has become subverted by the [Executive](#) branch; and what has enabled that subversion is a growth in *private* interests that have made our political system *itself* increasingly irrelevant.

If we are to learn anything from American history, it is that important developments in the *private* realm have occurred since our nation’s founding, and those developments have overwhelmed the political structure.

When the nation was founded, business firms were all relatively small, so that there was some approximation of the economists’ “perfect competition.” And accompanying that high degree of economic decentralization was a *social* system characterized by the lack of a rigid and pronounced social class system and a non-concentrated (geographically) population.

Over time, however, some firms in a given industry began to grow faster than other firms in that industry, in the process driving the smaller firms out of business, and making the industry more

and more monopolistic. And as that was occurring, a geographical re-distribution of the population was occurring, with depopulation occurring in rural areas, and the growth of a hierarchy of cities, with the largest cities becoming ever larger in size. As more and more of the population became associated with cities, the cities themselves became increasingly segregated on various bases—including income most notably. And as the “upper” class became more and more isolated geographically from “lower” classes, at the same time it came ever more to coalesce into a *conscious group* with interests distinct from other classes. This not only *enabled* it to pursue its own interests (at the expense of other groups), but actually *encouraged* such action. It is not surprising, then, that the society became ever more inegalitarian, with the elite not only not *concerned* with the interests of “lowers,” but not even *aware* of those interests.

While these *socio-economic* changes were occurring, changes were also occurring in the politico-governmental realm, but not in a manner that would enable maintenance of the “separation of powers” concept. Indeed, it’s highly probable that it would have been *impossible* for politico-governmental changes to have been made that would have retained that concept, for who—or what institution—had the *authority* to ensure that as the one changed, the other would change in sympathy? There *was* no authority “up above” some place that had not only impartiality, but authority; rather, the authority for effectuating changes lay with “the people,” but “the people” itself was *fading* in importance, with an elite *gaining* ever more importance. If something could have been happening in the private realm that would have *prevented* the emergence of an elite, it might have been possible to maintain a “balance of powers.” But nothing of the sort occurred, and an elite came to greatly overshadow “the people”—and does so even more today.

I agree with the Vatican that it would be “nice” if the “greed games” were to cease. But would this occur were a “supranational authority” to come into existence? A better question, however, is: *Can* such an authority come into existence—it being assumed that that authority would not only have *authority*, but have *independence*, and be able to make *objective* (i.e., impartial) decisions? My answer is that it is “utopian” to think this possible, *given the socio-economic situation that exists* not only in the United States, but most other countries as well. For there is only one [Bhutan](#) in the world, so far as I know!

It seems obvious to me that the starting point (as I argue in “[Silas Marner Out East](#)”) is to create a new societal unit—the “community”—which would be “family-like,” yet would not replace the family as commonly known; rather, it would be a “family of families.” And how to generate ideas regarding the *nature* of this new sort of “community”? I suggest use of the Structured Interaction Group (SIG), discussed in Chapter 8 of my e-book [What Are Churches For?](#)

As II Corinthians 5:17 states, “old things are passed away.” It is time that we make that statement come true, and begin to recognize the need for institutional change at a “low” level. Once *that* occurs, we will have increased the probability that any institutional changes made at a “higher” level will work.

[November 1, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/morality-the-real-world/>]

Morality and the Real World

Alton C. Thompson

Discussions of morality over the centuries have tended to focus on the *sources* of ideas regarding what is “right” and “wrong.” Thus, for centuries the Church argued that those ideas were given to humans by Deity, and that because the Church was the Deity’s representative on earth, it (i.e., the Church) was commissioned to interpret, and enforce, principles of right behavior.

And although for some the Church is still the “expert” on matters of morality, since the eighteenth century [Enlightenment](#), more and more people have turned to scientific observation and reason for their beliefs regarding morality. Despite that change, however, the focus has continued to be on *sources*, with some arguing that humans are naturally anti-social, but have had the intelligence to recognize that there are advantages in restraining anti-social tendencies, so that humans therefore (leaders in particular) created rules of behavior, taught/learned those rules, and then established means for enforcing those rules.

Others have argued, however, that humans are naturally *social*, rather, and exhibit anti-social behavior only because of being in *situations* that virtually *force* them to be other than social. This latter argument draws upon evolutionary reasoning, the observation of other primates, and experiments involving human infants, etc. (see my [The Development of Morality](#)” for citations), and is increasingly becoming accepted as the argument with most merit. What scholars interested in moral matters don’t seem to realize, though, is that knowing the *source* of moral behavior is not very helpful for *understanding* behavior (from a moral perspective) as it occurs in the *real world*.

Given that I perceive “holes” in the research efforts of scholars concerning morality, my goal here is to address several issues related to those “holes,” and specifically issues related to “obstacles”:

- *What* obstacles to moral behavior confront the citizens of a modern society (such as the United States)?
- In what different ways do people *react* to those obstacles?
- *How* can those obstacles be removed?

Before addressing these questions, however, let me specify that “moral” behavior is behavior that contributes to the *well-being* (physical and/or psychological) of others, “immoral” behavior is behavior that results in *ill-being* (physical and/or psychological) in others, and “amoral”

behavior is behavior that has no effects—“good” or “bad”—on others. One should keep in mind here that behaviors that affect *oneself* (e.g., excessive drinking of alcoholic beverages) can have implications for others. And that a behavior can be “moral” (or “immoral”) regardless of the *intentions* of the one acting. However, it is likely that if one consciously *intends* to be a “good” person, one will engage in more “random acts of kindness” than if one lacks such an intention—but is also more *aware* of obstacles in one’s path, and thereby more *bothered* by their presence.

Obstacles to Moral Behavior

A modern society is characterized by a detailed division of labor, with (virtually) each adult being some sort of *specialist*. It is also characterized by the presence of *organizations* that vary in size, with most of us being attached to one or more organizations—as employees, if nothing else. A fact that we don’t like to admit about those organizations, however, is that *most* of them engage in one or more immoral activities:

- The product(s) produced may be harmful (e.g., cigarettes).
- If the product is “news,” the information conveyed may be misleading, or even in serious error (e.g., the Fawning Corporate Media (FCM) in general, Fox “News” in particular).
- The product(s) produced may be overpriced relative to its cost (e.g., prescription drugs).
- The process(es) used in the product’s manufacture may be harmful to those involved in the production (e.g., much of the production in “third-world” countries for markets in the “first world”).
- The wages/benefits supplied to employees do not enable a decent life (e.g., much of the production in “third-world” countries for markets in the “first world”).
- The processes used in production involve pollution (any organization that uses—directly or indirectly (e.g., electricity generated by burning coal)—fossil fuels).
- The advertising of the organization is misleading, even erroneous (virtually any organization that advertises!).
- The “service(s)” provided by the organization are of a deceptive—i.e., dishonest—nature (e.g., financial “service” firms; this includes offering “services” that are not needed, with artificial demand being created by the organization).
- The organization is involved in killing innocent people (e.g., national governments (“our” government being a “good” example!), local police forces).

As an employee of an organization that engages in immoral activities (are there exceptions?!), one may not be *directly* responsible for what the organization does. One is, however, *indirectly*, responsible—whether or not one chooses to admit this.

While at home one contributes to pollution in that the heating/cooling of the dwelling unit likely involves the use of fossil fuels as does the generation of the electricity one uses. In addition, the building of the structure, along with its furnishing, likely involved pollution, and may also have involved the exploitation of labor.

During one's "free" time, one may engage in various volunteer activities that contributed to the well-being of others, but one will have great difficulty *avoiding* behaviors that are at least indirectly immoral:

- Every time one drives one's car, one "contributes" pollution to the atmosphere. Even if one drives an electric car, the electricity may have been generated by the burning of coal; if one rides a bus, the bus likely burns (polluting) diesel.
- In making purchases, the transportation of those items likely involved pollution, as did their manufacture. In addition, as their manufacture may have involved exploitation of labor, your purchases are indirectly responsible for that exploitation.

One does not ordinarily think of attending church as, in itself, a "sinful" activity (!), but:

- The building of the "sanctuary" may have involved pollution.
- Furnishing it, and acquiring supplies, may have involved pollution in addition to the exploitation of labor.
- Driving to and from church (unless one walks, or rides a horse) involves pollution.

In conclusion, if one lives in a modern society, it is virtually impossible for one to refrain from engaging in immoral behavior, if not direct, then indirect. Given this, the question that arises is: How do people react to that fact?

Reactions

One learns, as a citizen of a modern society, that there is such a thing as "moral" behavior; and (perhaps especially) that some behaviors are legal, others illegal, and if one engages in illegal behavior, one runs the risk of being found out by the authorities, then arrested and fined and/or incarcerated.

Two sorts of mental conflicts may arise. On the one hand, one may question the contents of the law: One may regard some illegal actions (e.g., drug use) as not immoral, and/or one may regard some legal actions (e.g., financial manipulations) as immoral.

A second sort of mental conflict (and the one given attention here) arises from the fact that one is taught that one should engage in moral actions and refrain from immoral ones, but lives in a society wherein it is virtually *impossible* to avoid engaging in immoral actions. This situation will be *recognized* to varying degrees by different individuals, and therefore also *reacted* to differently by different individuals:

- Some will *sense* the conflict, but not be *consciously* aware of it. The result will be internal turbulence, and that internal turbulence may very result in personality quirks, a physical ailment, etc.—i.e., [psychosomatic disorders](#).
- Some become relatively more aware of the conflict, and this awareness may cause them to make a conscious attempt to resolve the conflict. Those efforts, however, may result in a great deal of frustration, so that one never feels relaxed, content, etc.
- Some become dimly aware of the conflict, but then unconsciously seek to overcome the conflict by convincing themselves that the immoral behaviors forced on them are actually moral ones! Their views, if not *influenced* by televangelists or (other) “blowhards” on television, are at least *reinforced* by such people—who may, e.g., teach a convincing “blame the victim” ideology (such as the “free markets” one. In addition, the “tone” of television programs and advertising often encourages one in directions other than a moral-centered one. (For example, the Miller Brewing Company, headquartered here in Milwaukee, has recently been running commercials that emphasize the importance of being “manly”—despite the fact that the executives of that company are likely all “good Christians”!)
- With some, the effect of being forced to engage in immoral behaviors has the effect of dulling their moral sensitivities and thought, so that both tend to wither away. That is, they get so used to engaging in immoral behaviors that they not only lose *awareness* of doing so, but develop weak *conceptions* of what is “right” and “wrong.”

Removing the Obstacles

Once we reach the conclusion that the society that we live in is “constructed” in a way that virtually forces us to be immoral, such that even in our “free” time we even lack the *motivation* to engage in helpful behaviors (and would rather engage in, e.g., diversions), it becomes obvious that, e.g., working to increase church attendance is not the answer. Rather, the answer is to work for societal system change. As many of [my essays](#) on this site have addressed that topic, I feel no need to comment on it in this essay.

[November 2, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/law-society/>]

Law and Society

Alton C. Thompson

About a month ago our younger daughter (who, though 27, is still living with us) was involved in an automobile accident. Although no injuries were involved, and only cosmetic damage was done to the SUV that she “rear-ended,” the automobile that she was driving was “totaled.” She had just made a right turn on an unfamiliar street, at the time the rain was “coming down in sheets,” the SUV in front of her was turning left into a service station, our daughter was not able to stop in time, and a “crash” occurred. In her case, however, the “crash” was an “accident,” because the circumstances were such that a “crash” was virtually inevitable.

Despite those circumstances, the police officer who responded to the “crash” cited her for following too close, the “ticket” specifying a loss of 4 “points” and a fine of over \$100.00. In an effort to reduce, if not remove, the charges, she responded to the court date specified on the ticket (which was a few days ago), and I accompanied her to the police station’s court house. As we were among the last to sign in, her “case” was among the last to be heard by the judge that night. Our daughter pleaded guilty (although the judge mentioned the possibility of pleading “not guilty”), the 4 “points” was reduced to 2, and the fine was reduced to under \$100.00.

Given that we had to wait for about an hour before our daughter could go before the judge, we were able to learn some of the particulars of the dozen or so cases that preceded my daughter’s. What surprised me was that four of the cases involved drug possession and/or use by youth, two involved underage drinking (hey! This is Milwaukee, home of Miller, Pabst, Blatz, Schlitz, etc.!). I was surprised by the magnitude of the fines for drug possession/use (over \$500.00, before reduction), which forced me to think about the fairness of laws—and, more recently, about the role of laws in society.

In thinking about these matters, I called to mind the famous story of the woman caught in adultery who was brought before Jesus (John 7:53 – 8:11). For, in the first place, here was a case of unfairness; for the law that specified the stoning (to death) of those caught in adultery (Deuteronomy 22:22) stated that *both* parties were to be stoned to death, not just the woman—but only the guilty *woman* was brought before Jesus.

The “Scribes and Pharisees” pointed out to Jesus that the Law of Moses specified that this woman should be stoned to death, but in wanting to be able to accuse him of blasphemy, asked Jesus what *he* thought should be done to the woman. They were, of course, hoping that he would say “Don’t stone her,” so they could accuse him of blasphemy, and get rid of this troublemaker.

Jesus didn't give an immediate response—likely because he didn't *have* a ready response, and needed time to “come up” with an answer that would be non-blasphemous, yet express his view of the *purpose* of laws. Therefore, he kneeled, *pretending* to be writing in the sand with a finger—but *actually* working out, in his mind, a response that would enable him to accomplish his two objectives. Once he had developed that response, he rose to his feet, and in effect said, “You are right; this woman has been caught in adultery, and therefore, according to our Law, should be stoned to death. Thus, go ahead and do it, with one qualification: He who is without sin must cast the *first* stone.”

Having said this, he kneeled again, and *again* pretended to be writing in the sand with his finger. This gave the “Scribes and Pharisees” present time to think about what Jesus had said—the fact that he had “thrown the ball into their court.” Jesus had not *told* them that they were sinners, but as they reflected on what he had said, they realized that their own lives were not spotless. Indeed, this realization came first to those who were the *oldest*, and who therefore had done the most living and had gained some wisdom in the process; thus, the oldest among the group were the first to walk away from the scene, and the others—being respectful of their elders—followed suit. Leaving Jesus alone with the woman.

When the accusers had all left, Jesus asked a question which had an obvious answer: “Where are your accusers?” And she gave the obvious answer: “They have all left.” Jesus then told her that he was also in the category of non-accuser, but didn't stop there. He added: “Go your way now, but from now on try to lead a good life.”

This story is such a brilliant one that it leaves one breathless—and is such as to stick in one's mind forever. True, it's “just” a story, but the thoughts that it can provoke are endless—and I would like to use this essay to convey some of the thoughts that it has provoked in me recently.

I perceive Jesus as a person who had a *societal* perspective. He was interested in individual behavior, yes, but only insofar as that behavior contributed to the realization of a Good Society. Jesus recognized that a system of laws was useful, for it let people know what they should do (because doing that would help make the society a Good Society), and what they should *not* do (because engaging in such behaviors would tear the fabric of the society).

However, not all laws did what they were supposed to do—because over time, some laws become obsolete, and some laws that *should* be created don't yet exist. (A point developed by E. A. Ross in his [Sin and Society](#), 1907.) Also, some laws are not only obsolete, but are *enforced* unfairly (the stoning law in question), and how should one respond to that fact?

Jesus apparently realized that he was not in a position to change the law, but at least he could contribute to its non-enforcement—and to *thought* about the law by those who *were* in a position to change it. Thus, he put the “Scribes and Pharisees” in a position where were not only forced to examine themselves, but to think about whether the law itself was, in fact, in need of being changed. Jesus put them in such a position in a brilliant way—in that he *told* them nothing but,

rather, forced them to be more self-aware, this thereby helping them become more able to “put themselves in the shoes” of another. Thus, he taught them using a brilliant teaching method—one calculated to *work*.

Jesus realized that the purpose of having rules is to help create the Good Society, and insofar as they failed in that purpose, they should be changed—and his “teaching career” may have contributed to that end.

Jesus also realized, however, that having punishments associated with the breaking of laws often serves no useful end. When infractions occur, this represents a *tearing* of the societal fabric, but punishing offenders does not necessarily result in a *mending* of that fabric. For example, in the case of the woman caught in adultery, what *societal* purpose would be served by stoning her to death? Wouldn’t it make more sense to have her realize that she should not have done what she did, and to resolve not to make the same mistake again? I believe that this was Jesus’s attitude toward her, and also believe that the experience that she had with Jesus likely was a “life transformative” one for her.

Note, regarding this story, that all of the characters in it benefited: The woman was able to continue with her life, and if she had children, they were able to benefit from that fact; the “Scribes and Pharisees” learned to be more tolerant, and may even have gained a better perspective on the purpose of law—that its aim should be helping the society move ever more in a Good Society direction. It is *people* and their well-being—physical and psychological—that is what’s important, not rules *per se*; one should not become so fixated on rules that one forgets this fact.

Would that that idea would sink into the minds of our fellow citizens—especially of our leaders. For too often they are guided by an ideology (such as the “free market” one), and are involved in “fixing” the laws so that they serve the interests of the elite. And the shame of it all is that these individuals are too often “evangelical Christians”! People of whom Jesus would likely say—were he to be in our midst today—“I know ye not!”

Mayor Lenny Clotch (an obvious allusion to then-Mayor Ed Koch of New York) in the movie *Ghostbusters II* (1959) famously said: “Being miserable and treating other people like dirt is every New Yorker’s God-given right.” But who wants to live in such a society?! But that’s precisely what one is “asking for” if in one’s society the purpose of having laws is not recognized. Laws exist that should be abandoned; laws are created to favor some over others; laws that should be created, aren’t; laws are enforced unfairly; punishment is pursued as an end in itself; etc.

Laws *can* serve a useful purpose, but too often do the opposite. Thus, in creating the Good Society, this is but one fact that those involved should keep in mind.

Sorry, lawyers, for not providing much support for your profession. Come to think of it, I haven't provided *any* support for it!

[November 4, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/dancing-values/>]

Dancing and Values

Alton C. Thompson

If the values associated with (American) football are somewhat different from those associated with baseball (as [George Carlin](#) has noted), so are the values associated with the sort of dancing that occurs on [Dancing With the Stars](#) (a program on American television) different from those associated with [square dancing](#). Not that the values associated with square dancing cannot be—and have not been—corrupted by American culture. But the values associated with square dancing in its *pure* form are those of the Good Society; and the sort of dancing that occurs on *Dancing With the Stars*—reflects, and helps promote—values that are diametrically opposed to the Good Society.

I doubt that the judges on *Dancing*—i.e., Len Goodman, Carrie Ann Inaba, and Bruno Tonioli—think of that program from a *values* perspective: Their thinking is firmly embedded in the Existing Order. Likewise, I doubt that most viewers of the program think of it as having anything to do with values. For the judges the program is a means of gaining publicity for themselves and an income; for viewers it is a diversion. But its importance as a *values-promoting* vehicle is enhanced by those very facts.

To say that square dancing (in its pure form) “models” the Good Society—and thereby promotes the values of the Good Society—is also to say that square dancing is consistent with the values modeled and expounded by the Jesus of the Four Gospels.[1] Which, of course, is to imply—rather strongly!—that the dancing that occurs on the *Dancing* program helps wean its viewers—most of them Christians, one can assume—*away* from the value system propounded by the person upon whom Christianity was (purportedly) founded.[2]

My interest here, however, is not so much discussing the value system associated with Jesus but, rather, identifying the value system associated with square dancing (in its pure form)—a value system that overlaps significantly with that attributed to Jesus in the Four Gospels.

The first point that I would note regarding square dancing is that it has a *group* orientation. A given group consists of eight individuals—usually four females and four males (but with other combinations if gays are present)—but several such groups may be dancing simultaneously on the same dance floor. The “message” involved here is “We are doing something as a *group*, not as *individuals*.” Put another way, the focus is on “we,” not “me.” The dance *per se* is structured so as not to call attention to any of the participants. The participants have *individuality*, of course, in that each is “built” differently, and no *uniform* is worn (although *costumes* may be

worn, with some similarity in them); but the dance encourages that individuality to be thought of in terms of differences in *kind* (and therefore of equal value) rather than differences in *quantity* (i.e., better, worse; pretty, ugly; etc.).

One is encouraged, by the dance, not only to think of oneself as a member of a group, but an *equal* member of the group. Each individual is *needed* in the group for the group to fulfill its function, and all are needed equally: Each is as important a member of the group as each other; no *hierarchy* exists within the group. Because the group is structured this way, one *learns*, as a participant, to perceive the other members of the group as one's equals—and this learning will likely have “carry over” value. That is, as one goes about one's life while *not* dancing, one continues to perceive those with whom one has contact as one's equals: One does not feel inferior to others, nor does one feel superior to them.

While one is dancing, the others with whom one is dancing become, in effect, one's *family*. And as one comes to perceive them that way, that perception *also* has “carry over” value in that while one is engaged in activities other than square dancing, one tends to treat those with whom one has contact as one's family members. This is especially true, of course, if square dancing is common in one's society rather than exceptional.\

Square dancing, by its very nature, involves certain *rules* to follow—with different dances involving different rules—and for a given dance to “work,” those participating in the dance must all *know* the rules, and also *follow* them. Usually the rules are simple enough that virtually anyone can learn them (regardless of age, intelligence, etc.), and the movements involved are simple enough that all but the handicapped can do them. Thus, a given group will not only involve both sexes, but can involve the very young to the very old; and even the handicapped need not be excluded, for they can be “callers.”

Most “regular” dancing involves couples, and if the “coupling” occurs after everyone has arrived at the dance location, many of the females may attend reluctantly, because in being “plain” (in outward appearance) they are afraid that they will not be chosen to dance, and must resign themselves to being “wallflowers.” With square dancing, however, even though “coupling” may occur prior to arrival at the dance location, one changes partners *as the dance progresses*. This helps participants learn to treat others with *respect*, even though they are *attracted* to but one other member of the group.

In following the rules, the participants are *cooperating*, rather than *competing*. As dancing occupies only a small part of one's time during a given week, one has abundant time to act as an *individual*—to establish goals for *oneself*, and then act on those goals. But what square dancing does for people is remind them that their lives are not lived in isolation, and that often there is a need for them to cooperate with others in achieving some goal. Participation in square dancing not only *reminds* them of this, but helps *prepare* them for it.

In addition, square dancing helps participants come to perceive others as *living humans* rather than as mere *objects*—as beings similar to themselves, with the same basic needs as themselves. Therefore, when one learns of a “neighbor” in need, one *empathizes* with that person—actually *feels* the same pain as the neighbor—and acts on that feeling. It’s true that we are “designed” in such a way that when we feel the pain of another, our (“selfish”) actions to reduce *our* feeling of pain also help reduce the feeling of pain in the *other*; but “civilized” life is in conflict with that “design,” and participation in square dancing helps us counteract the influence of “civilized” life, and “return”—if but momentarily—to a more “natural” way of life.

In addition to the above consequences associated with square dancing, there are these potential [benefits](#):

- It provides some exercise—enough to get the blood flowing, but not so much that it becomes strenuous.
- The music can be energizing.
- It fulfills a need for interaction with other people.
- It enables “breaking the ice” with others easily.
- It helps overcome shyness and develop self-confidence.
- It promotes inter-generational harmony.
- In that it involves some [touching](#), it fulfills a need that we all have—not just as infants, but as humans.
- It’s fun, thus good for the immune system, good for relieving stress and fighting depression.
- It helps one develop a tolerant attitude.
- No embarrassment is involved.
- It may help keep one’s mind active, and thereby help slow down the aging process.
- Etc.

Notes

1. This is not to deny the existence of the [Gospel of Q](#), the [Gospel of Thomas](#), and other [gospels](#); it is simply to recognize that these other gospels are not as well known as the Four Gospels.
2. What is truly pathetic about *that* fact is that few pastors are likely aware of this—perhaps because they *also* watch, and enjoy, the program!

[November 5, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/starving-what-beast-and-how/>]

Starving *What* Beast? And *How*?

Alton C. Thompson

"John [Anderson] tells us that first we've got to reduce spending before we can reduce taxes. Well, if you've got a kid that's extravagant, you can lecture him all you want to about his extravagance. Or you can cut his allowance and achieve the same end much quicker." So said Ronald Reagan during the 1980 presidential debates. The *context* of Reagan's comment was his perception of the federal government as a "beast" that was becoming too large—too fat, i.e., that it was spending money for frivolous purposes; and Reagan's solution to this "problem" was to reduce the federal government's revenues (derived from taxes), "thereby" preventing the government to continue its foolish ways.

In 2011 the "beast" is a two-headed one: The federal government—dominated as it is by the military; and the financial elite—which controls not only the federal government, but the entire society. Thus, "starving the beast" has a different meaning in 2011 than it did in 1980: Not only is the "beast" a different animal now; *starving* that "beast" requires an approach different than reducing taxes.

What approach is required now? The group that now supports the beast—let us say that that group is "hosting" the beast—must engage in certain counter actions. And let there be no doubt about this claim that the beast *is* being "hosted," for the beast is first and foremost a parasite. And given that fact, the beast is clearly *dependent* upon the host—not the other way around—and that fact of dependence can be used, by the host, to its advantage, if it would so choose.

Those constituting the host may now perceive themselves as powerless to respond to the fact that the beast is "screwing" them in various ways. The fact of the matter, however, is that there are a number of different courses of action open to them, each of which has the potential of helping starve the beast:

- Move from the United States to a less "beastly" country (e.g., Bhutan?).
- Cease having children—so that the relative size of the host will decrease over time, meaning that the host would entirely disappear within a century—from *this* country, at least.

- Accomplish suicide. After all, a dead host makes a poor host!
- Establish “assisted *non*-living centers” so that others can also have their lives ended prematurely—and thus also be non-hosts.
- Either become a self-sufficient homesteader, or establish, with others, a community that would be self-sufficient—thereby depriving the beast of food and water.

Each of the above options would involve:

- Reducing the tax revenues received by the federal government.
- A reduction of the labor force needed to operate the various firms that constitute our economy and run our government.
- A reduction of purchases from retail stores, resulting in the reduction of manufacturing activity and importing, those reductions not only impacting the federal government negatively, but the economy.

As firms go “bust,” there is less and less to finance, a point eventually being reached where there no longer is a host in *this* country to support the beast, forcing the beast either to adopt a host in other countries or to die of starvation. However, if the same sorts of actions occur in other countries as occur in this one, only the latter option will be open to the beast—meaning that it will simply starve to death.

What is the likelihood of this occurring—i.e., the beast being starved to death? I would put the probability at 1.00—but not for the reasons given above. What is most likely, rather, is that the beast will continue in control, paying no heed to the threat posed by global warming, so that by the end of this century not only will the beast be gone, but the host as well.

This is a sad song to sing, I will grant. But what other song *is* there to sing?!

[November 9, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/addressing-our-plutocracy-problem/>]

Addressing Our Plutocracy Problem

Alton C. Thompson

Of the numerous problems that face us at present, two in particular are of especial importance. One of these problems has been developing over the past few decades, the other one is more in the future than the present. And although the two problems are distinctly *different* one from the other, they are related in that the second problem stems, in large part, from the first one.

The first problem is that we are ever more becoming a *plutocracy*. We have never, of course, been a *democracy*—our national government having been designed with a *representative* branch, true, but with that branch being checked by *executive* and *judicial* branches, and the representative branch *itself* consisting of two parts (a House of Representatives and a Senate) to enable further checking. Still, with the addition of amendments to the Constitution over time, our national government became relatively more democratic.

However, during the past few decades formal rights have increasingly lost their value as the society has become increasingly inegalitarian. For the latter development has meant not only that income has become increasingly concentrated in “uppers,”[1] but that the wealthy have been *using* their wealth to (a) get “their” people into office, to (b) lobby politicians to do what *they* want done, to (c) influence public opinion (by gaining control over “news” organizations, and publicizing the “research” results of “think tanks” that they have established), etc. In short, the wealthy have used their wealth to gain a high degree of control over the society—thereby earning the title *plutocrats*.

The (suspicious[2]) “9/11 event” was a godsend to the Plutocracy, for it served their interests in several ways. First, it provided an excuse for further restricting our [liberties](#), under the pretext that there was a serious threat from “terrorists” in foreign countries, thus a need for “homeland security.” Second, it provided a convenient excuse to continue America’s [warlike ways](#), thereby providing a source of income to itself (from public monies—from whence comes the phrase “socialism for the rich”). Third, creating the specter of enemies abroad, the plutocracy was able to fan the fires of “patriotism”—thereby enlisting the support of even those who would not be benefiting from military adventurism,[3] and making criticism of their (i.e., he plutocrats’) actions difficult.

The second problem—and one of even more potential significance—is the threat posed by global warming.[4] Various gases in the atmosphere produce a “[greenhouse effect](#)”—meaning that they trap heat re-radiated from earth. Were those gases not present in the atmosphere, our planet would be a lifeless one—like the other planets in our solar system. But there’s such a thing as

having *too much* of a greenhouse effect, in that an excess of those gases will result in excessive heating of earth's atmosphere.

In the 1970s English scientist [James Lovelock](#) introduced the term “Gaia” for earth, meaning by that term that the various components of earth—physical, chemical, biological—form a self-regulating *system*, with *negative* feedback mechanisms being an integral part of that system, and acting to maintain relative stasis. Those mechanisms can be stressed, however, to the point where they “convert” into *positive* feedback mechanisms—thereby acting to change the very nature of the system.

Scientists have long known—going back at least to the pioneering work of Swedish scientist [Svante Arrhenius](#), over a hundred years ago—that (a) the carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere is a greenhouse gas, and that (b) the burning of fossil fuels increases the CO₂ content of the atmosphere. What such burning in effect “accomplishes” is the removal of carbon from below the earth's surface and its transfer to earth's atmosphere, thereby increasing its concentration in the atmosphere.

Earth, as a self-regulating “machine” has an ability to “handle” disturbances that come its way. It's capacity for so doing is, however, limited, and some scientists—James Lovelock among them—believe that earth either has already crossed a “tipping point” regarding global warming or is “destined” to do so soon. If and when (Lovelock would say *when*, not *if*) this occurs, there will be “runaway,” as positive feedback mechanisms come to replace negative feedback ones, and the phenomena that constitute global warming become ever more notable and noticeable.

These changes will impact human living in a variety of ways, most importantly in that they will likely result in a [severe culling](#) of the world's population by 2100 CE. Lovelock would add that regardless of the *preventive* measures that we might now take, the *inertia* of our current way of life is such that global warming is *inevitable*—so that our only choice now is to *adapt* to environmental change as best we can. Even then, it's likely that the world's population (currently 7 billion) will be reduced substantially—perhaps down to about 1 billion—by 2100 CE (per Lovelock). This prediction is so important that it warrants repeating:

As James Lovelock and some other scientists state, we are now past the point of no return so far as global warming is concerned, so that although we should, of course, cease pouring greenhouse gases into the atmosphere as soon as possible, we will not be able to prevent further warming, and our only choice is that of adaption. Even then, it's likely that the world's population will be culled severely by 2100 CE.

I asserted at the beginning that this second problem exists largely because of the first problem—the fact that a plutocracy currently rules our country. Various factors help explain *why* our economy is dependent on fossil fuels, but the fact that we *continue* to be dependent on such fuels is in large part attributable to the current dominance of a plutocracy. One would think that (at least some) members of the plutocracy would realize that when the “culling” referred to above

occurs, they are as likely to be its victims as anyone—and probably will be *more* likely. Thus, it is a paradoxical fact that not only is the plutocracy *not* leading the way to a non-polluting future but is actually playing a key role in *preventing* such a future to emerge.

I suppose that there is a (somewhat) rational explanation for the plutocracy's current inaction:

- Its members are unaware of the threat of global warming (having a fixation on the immediate present).
- They are aware of the *claim* that global warming is occurring but, being anti-science, refuse to accept that possibility.
- Their thinking on the matter is being clouded by their acceptance of a “free markets” ideology—so that they are convinced that “the market” will handle any problem(s) that come along.
- They accept an evangelical “Christian” theology, and therefore are convinced that because God favors them (which is why they are so “successful”!), God will not allow them to be “done in” by global warming.
- They realize (or at least sense) that (a) their position in society is dependent on the fact that the economy “runs” on fossil fuels, that (b) there is no currently-available substitute fuel, so that (c) to maintain their current position, they must continue to “go” with fossil fuels. And so they do . . . even though some of them know surely that they are leading the world to sure disaster. It almost seems that their intention is to go out “in a blaze of glory”—taking the rest of us with them. Irrational? No, insane!
- Etc.

Thus, it is not at all clear why the plutocracy is not in the forefront of sponsoring research to develop alternate (to fossil fuels) fuels, for not only is this not to the interests of we “commoners,” it is not to the long-run interests of the plutocrats either. For as global warming occurs, the “primitive” Inuits, for example, will have a better chance of survival than will the plutocrats.

Given that the plutocrats are, in effect, leading us toward oblivion, the question arises: If our only choice (per, e.g., Lovelock) is that of adaptation, and we will receive no help from the plutocrats in doing so, what options—if any—do we “commoners” have? So that at least *we commoners* will increase the chance that *our* grandchildren, at least, will be able to survive the ravages of global warming.

It would seem that because the plutocrats are the principal obstacle to progress on this matter, any solution to the problem would involve the removal of those plutocrats from the picture. In doing so, one argument that has been put forth (in effect, at least) is that we must begin by gaining an understanding of *how* the plutocracy developed.

Bill Moyers, in a recent (November 2, 2011) article (“How Wall Street Occupied America”) in [*The Nation*](#) argues[5] that the “rise of the money power in our time goes back forty years,” and specifically to a corporate lawyer named Lewis Powell, who was later to become a justice on the U. S. Supreme Court. Powell became shocked, during the Richard Nixon years, by the “attack . . . [that was occurring] on the American free enterprise system,” and urged his compatriots to fight this trend by (as Moyers describes it) setting “speakers loose across the country,” taking “on prominent institutions of public opinion—especially the universities, the media[,] and the courts,” keeping “television programs ‘monitored the same way textbooks should be kept under constant surveillance,’” and “above all” recognizing “that political power must be ‘assiduously cultivated; and that when necessary, it must be used aggressively and with determination’ and ‘without embarrassment.’”

To pursue this program Powell urged the U. S. Chamber of Commerce to “create think tanks, legal foundations[,] and front groups of every stripe. These groups could, he said, be aligned into a united front through ‘careful long-range planning and implementation . . . consistency of action over an indefinite period of years, in the scale of financing available only through joint effort, and in the political power available only through unified action and united organizations.’”

Moyers notes that the memo Powell prepared and disseminated had an immediate effect. The National Association of Manufacturers moved its main offices to Washington, DC, so that the number of registered lobbyists in DC increased from 175 firms in 1971 to nearly 2,500 in 1982. Organizations such as the Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute, and Americans for Prosperity, etc., “united in pushing back against political equality and shared prosperity. They triggered an economic transformation that would in time touch every aspect of our lives.” Then in 1978, William E. Simon (who had been Nixon’s treasury secretary) published a book, [*A Time for Truth*](#), that argued that “‘funds generated by business’ must ‘rush by multimillions’ into conservative causes to uproot the institutions and the ‘heretical strategy’ of the New Deal. He called on ‘men of action in the capitalist world’ to mount ‘a veritable crusade’ against progressive America.”

Although Moyers painted a rather bleak picture of fascist-like developments that have been occurring in this country, he was unable to leave his article on a pessimistic note. Near the end of the article he stated “take heart from the past, and don’t ever count the people out.” He noted that during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when wealth was becoming extremely concentrated at the top, “Embattled citizens rose up . . . and organized to educate their neighbors, held rallies, made speeches, petitioned and canvassed, marched and marched again. The plowed

the fields and planted the seeds—sometimes on bloody ground—that twentieth-century leaders used to restore ‘the general welfare’ as a pillar of American democracy. They laid down the now-endangered markers of a civilized society: legally ordained minimum wages, child labor laws, workers’ safety and compensation laws, pure foods and safe drugs, Social Security, Medicare[,], and rules that promote competitive markets over monopolies and cartels.” Moyers concluded by implying that “the people” will rise once again.

As much as I admire Moyers as a person, I have questions about his analysis (and am bothered by the fact that he made no reference to global warming):

- *Will* the people rise up as they did earlier?
- If they do, *will* it take the same form as earlier?
- *Should* it take that earlier form, or should it take some other form?
- Is Moyers correct in asserting (seemingly) that we have become a plutocracy through the efforts of certain *specific individuals* (e.g., Lewis Powell and William Simon)—individuals who just happened to be exceedingly evil—and that if those individuals had never been born, a plutocracy would not exist today?

Of these four questions, I regard the fourth one as the place to begin in offering comments, and here I would present a rather different sort of argument. I would argue that given a society within which competition is valued,[6] yet the residents vary in their interests, abilities, etc., and the “starting point” is one of many firms in any given industry, the prevailing mentality (in conjunction with technological developments occurring in some firms, but not others) is likely to result, over time, in some firms “dropping out” of the competition, with some of the remaining firms then expanding in size.

Thus, within any given industry there is a “natural” tendency toward oligopoly, if not monopoly. And with this occurring in all, or most, industries, *structural* change is occurring in the economy, which change will likely be felt throughout the society, not just the economy. CEOs and other members of the developing plutocracy will come to recognize the increase in power at their disposal, and will begin to use it to their advantage:

- Lobbying members of the national congress.
- Working to gain control over the judicial branch.
- Gaining control over the mass media, so that their interests are furthered by those media.

- Related to this, using the giant [Themis](#) database being developed with the financial support of the Koch brothers to further their interests.
- Gaining control over the entertainment industry, so that people's minds will be diverted from what's transpiring in the society, and the entertainment itself will promote its interests.
- Engaging in efforts to disenfranchise people (via gerrymandering, requiring photo IDs for voting purposes, etc.).
- Etc.

Thus, rather than emphasizing *personalities* (as Moyers has), I would emphasize *structural* changes in the economy—changes that, for the most part, have “just happened” rather than resulted from conscious decision-making—and I would argue that that factor, in conjunction with the fact that people vary in their personalities, abilities, values, etc., makes it virtually inevitable that our society would regress to the point that it has.

My explanation for “why we are where we are” at present prevents me from being as optimistic as Moyers's apparently is. The current situation, I believe, is very different from the “progressive” era mentioned by Moyers; and although the “Wall Street protests” of recent days give one some reason for hope, I think that one would be overly optimistic if one believed that these protests—in themselves—will have significant consequences. They have “awakened” many people, true, but unless those “awakened ones” know “where to go from here,” their “awakening” will accomplish little.

What, then, is the answer? A part of the answer is to “[starve the beast](#)” by withdrawing support from the Existing Order. From a more positive perspective I see the answer in societal system change within the shell of the Existing Order, involving movement in the direction of a cooperative eco-communitarian sort of society. As I have already commented on that matter in my e-book [What Are Churches For?](#) and in other [essays](#) on this site, I refer the reader to those other works.

I realize that it would be neither possible nor desirable to convert our society into one of cooperative eco-communities (CECs), but believe that by *starting* the process of societal system change with this institution in mind, one will lay a good *foundation* for whatever Good Society that emerges—a society that would be far more democratic than what exists at present, while also being more in tune with the natural world. As I said earlier, I agree with James Lovelock that a severe culling of the world's population will inevitably occur between now and 2100 CE, but that if we are to maximize the number who can survive in 2100 CE, while also providing

democratic living for all, we will need not only to *have* societal system change, but the *proper* such change.

Notes

1. See the graph in [this](#).
2. See., e.g., [this](#).
3. People who, indeed, would be losing their lives “serving their country”—i.e., working in the interests of the plutocracy.
4. I should note that “global warming” is a shorthand term that refers to several atmospheric phenomena all having a common cause—a (a) trend of increase in the global mean temperature, (b) an increase in the number of storms, (c) an increase in the number of severe storms, (d) increased variability in atmospheric conditions—both geographically and for a given location over time, (e) etc.
5. Moyers bases his argument on one developed in Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson’s [Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer and Turned its Back on the Middle Class](#), 2010.
6. It even being promoted as “good,” if not “natural,” in academia—in Microeconomics in particular.

November 10, 2011: <http://bravenewworld.in/the-churches-can-be-trusted-to-lie/>

The Churches Can Be Trusted . . . to Lie

Alton C. Thompson

[Inferno](#) (i.e., Hell), as conceived by Dante Alighieri [1265 – 1321], consisted of a series of concentric layers, with Satan at the center (waist deep in ice, it should be noted!), with Zone 9 surrounding that center being the Circle of Treachery. Those in that Zone were also in ice, with those in the innermost (of four) “rounds” being solidly encased in ice, those in the outermost round having their faces sticking through the ice.

The outermost of the “rounds” (Round 1) contained those who had been treacherous to family members. Those in Round 2 had been treacherous to a political party or to their homeland. Round 3 contained those who had betrayed friends or guests. And, finally, those in Round 4—closest to the center of Hell—had betrayed their masters or benefactors.

The plutocrats who dominate our society today can all be placed in Zone 9, but do not fit neatly into any of Dante’s four Rounds. However, of the various groups in our society, I would place them closest to the center, with church leaders a little farther from the center—but closer to the center than lawyers!

The reason for such a placement of religious leaders becomes especially evident at this time of year, when churches are planning their budgets for the following year, and are therefore engaged in the game of inducing feelings of guilt in congregants, so that the latter will “cough up” more money than they had for the current year.[1] The primary ploy used by church leaders is to bring in the concept of the [tithe](#). This concept is interpreted as referring to 10% of one’s income, and it is asserted that (a) tithing is Biblical and, therefore, that (b) one, as a Christian, is obligated to give at least 10% of one’s (gross) income to the church of which one is a member.

The term “tithe” occurs at various points in the “Old Testament” (i.e., what for Jews is Scripture), for example in Deuteronomy 14:22 – 29 (quoting here from the *Good News Bible*, 1976). The fact that the statements here are in quotation marks indicates that they are attributed to Moses:

“Set aside a tithe—a tenth of all that your fields produce each year. Then go to the one place where the LORD your God has chosen to be worshiped; and there in his presence eat the tithes of your grain, wine, and olive oil, and the first-born of your cattle and sheep. Do this so that you may learn to have reverence for the LORD your God always. If [.,however,.] the place of worship is too far from your home for you to carry there the tithe of the produce that the LORD has blessed you with, then do this: Sell your produce [*and* first-born of cattle or sheep?] and take the money with you to the one place of worship. Spend it on whatever you want [to eat and drink]—

beef, lamb, wine, beer—and there, in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your families are to eat and enjoy yourselves. [That is, “party” with that which you have purchased!]

“Do not [,though,] neglect the [Levites](#) who live in your towns; they have no property of their own [and therefore don’t produce any food items]. At the end of every third year bring the tithe of all your crops and store it in your towns. This food is for the Levites, since they own no property, and for the foreigners, orphans, and widows who live in your towns. They are to come and get all they need. Do this, and the LORD your God will bless you in everything you do.”

This is a passage that you will never heard read in a church, because its message is in conflict with church leaders’ desire to create feelings of guilt in congregants so that the latter will increase their “pledge” from the current year. (Interesting, isn’t it, that if one “Googles” “lies about tithing”—without the quotation marks—one gets about 1,290,000 hits!) And conflict there is, for:

- The tithing rule applied only to *landowners*.
- More specifically, it applied only to those landowners whose land was being used to *produce food items*.
- The tithe required was to be “paid” with *food* items, not money.
- For the first two years of three the tithe from a given property was to be taken to the place where “your God has chosen to be worshiped” and there eaten—evidently by, and only by, those who live on and/or work that property. Note that although the 10% rule applied to “grain, wine, and olive oil,” it did *not* apply to animals. In the case of animals the tithe involved only the “first born.”
- If one believed that the place of worship was too far to carry one’s food items, one could choose to sell them, and bring the money from that sale to the place of worship. In this case one would then buy food at that location, and then consume it (as a family).
- The third year would involve different activities. In this case one would take one’s tithe (but only of crops—note that in this case there is no reference to “first-born” cattle or sheep), *not* to the place of worship, but, rather, to a near town. Evidently the towns had storage facilities, and one was required to bring one’s tithe to one of these, and deposit it there. These then functioned as “food pantries” for those in need—specifically, [Levites](#), foreigners, orphans, and widows [and others in need—such as the poor?].

These facts about the tithe raise questions not only regarding what church leaders say to induce their congregants to increase their giving (e.g., it’s Biblical, it’s your obligation, as a self-proclaimed Christian, to tithe, you will be blessed if you do, etc.); more generally, they invite one to think about the *purpose* of church-going—not in the sense of what purpose(s) churches *do* serve but what purpose(s) they *should* serve. Given this, I offer my views on the matter in this essay. I realize that the above discussion has seemingly provided a preface for examining what

church leaders may have said on November 6 (or will be saying on November 13). But not finding such an examination to be especially appealing (to me)—I dislike wallowing in excrement!—I choose instead to deal with a more fundamental issue in this essay.

In choosing to deal with “purpose” in this essay, let me make clear at the outset that what I say below has nothing in common with what Rick Warren says in his [*The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission*](#) (1995, 2011). Neither does it have anything in common with many of the book’s critics (see, e.g., [this](#)).

My starting point here is the fact that the members of a given church are commonly referred to as constituting a *congregation*. This terminology suggests that those who travel to a church at a given time and on a given day do so not simply to *meet*, but to *congregate*. Now whereas people *meet* to, e.g., listen to a singer or a lecturer, etc., when people *meet* the suggestion is that they will be *listening* to someone, with their attention focused on that someone. People *meet* not to be with other people but, rather, to hear words/music emanating from a “performer” of some type.

When people *congregate*, on the other hand, the implication is that something more than *assembly*,^[2] *meeting* is involved—that they are meeting to interact one with another; the *point* of their meeting is to be with others for the purpose of interacting with them. *That* fact suggests that—because they have freely chosen to meet with others—that they have a *desire* so to do.

These facts lead us to certain questions about members of a *congregation*:

- Do congregants devote most of their time, while at church, interacting with the others present?
- If they do not, should they be?
- If they should be, for what purpose(s)?

In addressing these questions we can first note that in providing an answer to the second question, the matter of *purpose* likely would be involved. Thus, questions two and three can actually be regarded as a single question.

Question one has an obvious answer: During a given church “service” there is little or no interaction between the congregants present. There may, e.g., be a brief “passing of the peace” period during which one greets neighbors and shakes their hand, but such activities hardly qualify as *interaction*. After the “service” there may be a “coffee hour,” but during that period the interaction is likely to consist of idle chit chat that has little bearing on, e.g., the pastor’s sermon. Some adults may attend a “class” prior to the “service” and this may involve discussion of religious matters; but often such classes involve a leader “teaching” rather than open-ended discussions.

If, in fact, church meetings involve little interaction, the question arises: *Should* they? Actually, there is a more basic question to ask here—*What should occur during church meetings?*—and I will address that question briefly here, rather.

In addressing *that* question, the logical place to begin is with recognition that the Christian Bible is claimed as the primary authority by most churches. Given that, the question is: What is the Bible “about”?—a question that I answer in Chapter 1 of my e-book [*What Are Churches For?*](#) I feel no need to summarize what I have written in that e-book. Let me just state that if I were required to summarize the Bible briefly, I would simply quote Matthew 25:35, 36:

I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.

That is, I perceive the Bible as a book of suggestions regarding how one should live. I would add, however, that the sort of society that we live in today is very different from, e.g., 2000 years ago, so that there is a need to update the Bible’s message while retaining its basic spirit. This means that the Bible’s orientation to *now* and *near* needs to be modified thusly:

- The “neighbor” whom we are to love (Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 22:39) may be half way around the world. And although the latter cannot be communicated with face-to-face (with “skype” as a close approximation, however), rapid communication by, e.g., email is easily accomplished.
- Others’ well-being in the future needs to be given attention along with their well-being in the present. Indeed, unless we address the threat of global warming, we run the risk of finding our species reduced significantly in numbers—even to the point of extinction. (Unfortunately, severe culling is likely to occur even if we do our best to adapt.)

Given what church members *should* be focusing on, it is logical to conclude that when they meet (on Sunday mornings, e.g.) they should expect:

- To be informed as to what needs exist “out there.”
- To learn what their particular abilities for service might be, and how to develop those abilities.
- To learn of opportunities “out there” to which they might lend their support—financial and otherwise.
- To discuss with others ideas/suggestions as to what might be done.
- To organize with others in the congregation and then develop plans for action, and work to implement those plans (during “off” hours).

- To become motivated, inspired—to “get one’s batteries re-charged” so that they can face the coming week with courage and determination.
- Etc.

There might not be any need for a pastor, but would be need for a coordinator. Some of that person’s responsibilities might be:

- To learn about opportunities “out there,” and then report on them to the congregants.
- To speak briefly at each meeting, and also bring in special speakers (to speak at length) from time to time on relevant matters that might have especial interest to a particular group of congregants.
- To organize groups for various purposes—to discuss, to plan, to engage in certain activities during “free time,” etc.
- To keep a record of what different congregational groups are doing, and present that information in a newsletter.
- To make an effort to bring “outsiders” into the group.

This “new look” church would, like existing churches, need to have the financial support of its members, but the Coordinator should simply be “upfront” on what was needed, and for what purposes, and then let congregants decide what they could afford to give, or what they would like to give, with no pressure being applied. The use of honesty on this matter would be refreshing—and might work far better than knocking people over the head.

Given the sorts of activities that would occur in this “new church,” there would be no need for a fancy building with fancy furnishings, there would be no need for an organ (for having music would not contribute to the church’s mission), etc. By keeping operational expenses as low as possible no one would have much of a financial burden, and whatever “excess” money a person had could be put to purposes that would have a true Biblical basis. Simply giving money to a church *per se* has no such basis!

Notes

1. For many Christian churches, the second Sunday in November is “Stewardship Sunday.”
2. One church denomination, however, refers to itself as the Assemblies of God.